Literary Constructions of
Victorian Certificate of Education
(V.C.E.) English

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ABSTRACT
For more than a century English has been taught in Australian schools, encompassing a range of traditions and practices lived and enacted in classroom communities. English subjects are continually evolving, moving toward a new world of infinite possibilities for human ingenuity. Teachers’ perspectives on their practices are embedded within this dynamic context, and within discourses about the traditions and responsibilities of the English subjects. In contemporary times, however, new demands are made on English and English teachers. With an increased emphasis on ‘communication’, including multimodal forms of text and literacy, the need for young people to be critically literate, and the challenges of twenty first century society and globalization mean that English is expected to fulfill diverse agendas and roles. As the only compulsory subject in most states in Australia, English occupies a significant role, catering to a wide range of students with diverse needs and abilities.

Within this context, the place of literature within mainstream English has become a matter of debate. Discussions about literature are inextricably bound to decisions about English, historically drawn together around debates about language, culture and canonicity. Definitions of literature and literary merit are therefore, inherently arbitrary and subjective. For the purpose of framing this research, literature is broadly perceived as both artifact and practice, encompassing literary dimensions of exploring ideas, language, contexts, aesthetics and form. An understanding of literature’s identity, role and place in V.C.E. English is challenging to discern, due to the absence of an explicit reference to literature in the Study Design, although the course recommends texts “should have literary merit, be worthy of close study and be an excellent example of form and genre” (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 13). A perspective of literature from the V.C.E. Literature Study Design (V.C.A.A., 2006b) is utilised as an operational definition within the thesis:

Meaning is derived from the relationship between the text, the context in which it was produced and the experience of life and literature the reader brings to the texts…texts that vary in form and range from past to contemporary social and cultural contexts. Students learn to understand that texts are constructions, to consider the complexity of language and to recognise the influence of contexts and form (p. 7).

The introduction of a revised final two-year English course in Victoria, V.C.E. English, in 2007-2008 brought questions about literature, the composition and purposes of English to the fore. Drawing on interviews with eight teachers of Victorian Certificate of Education (V.C.E.), the study set out to explore the place of Literature in contemporary English curriculum, and the complex values, beliefs and practices that influence teachers’ views.
Teachers were chosen to represent a range of experience, location and student cohorts. The study drew on narrative inquiry methodologies and critical discourse analysis to undertake and analyse three rounds of narrative interviews. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using three related frames, to identify core elements and discourses. The first iteration locates significant narrative sequences. The second subjects these narrative sequences to poetic restructuring and analysis, while the third introduces critical discourse techniques. The use of three forms of analysis enables the study to retain the principles of respect and open listening that sit at the heart of narrative inquiry while also revealing key concerns, discourses and priorities running through the narratives at a deeper level.

Key themes associated with canonicity, aesthetics, humanity, passion and pleasure emerge in teachers’ narratives. English has an important role in deepening students’ connections to the world and conceptually, linguistically and aesthetically dealing with its challenges. Literature matters, and to varying degrees, is significant in how these teachers imagine the future of the subject as well as its present state. Literature is envisioned as an aesthetic mirror of society and a treasury of language and ideas that enrich students’ experiences of the world, calling on the enlightenment rhetorics of a golden age. Their perceptions of literature and its merit are also influenced by progressive rhetorics of globalization in a technological age. The motif of the global village pervades their reflections, shaping how they think about the role of English and literature in responding to issues of culture, citizenship, humanity and innovation in a time of unprecedented change.

Collectively the reflections of these eight teachers suggest English has a responsibility to academically, ethically and aesthetically prepare students for future innovation and global citizenship. Significant discourses of passion, pleasure, ethics and democracy underpin their interpretations of the V.C.E. English Study Design, and how they envision the future of literature within Australian English subjects. Attending to teachers’ voices through research of this kind ensures that debates about English, and literary Englishes among these, reflect the depth and complexity of teachers’ understandings, and the need and possibilities for the continued presence of literature within contemporary and future secondary English curriculum.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_____________________________
Bree R. Kitt
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CHAPTER ONE

ENGLISH AND LITERATURE IN SENIOR ENGLISH

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English subjects are ongoing sites of contestation (Doecke, Howie, & Sawyer, 2006) inextricably part of a wider global, social and educational nexus, which critically frame how teachers (re)conceptualise literary practices. As a broadly defined humanities based discipline, English education is multifaceted, fluid and engaging as it grapples retrospectively and progressively with discourses, traditions and new contexts, which place considerable demands on its educators and students. Howie (2008b) describes the English subjects as a site of “infinite possibilities, embracing differences”, an apt metaphor for situating this research. The study employs both narrative method and discourse analysis to explore teachers’ diverse constructions of literature within the senior Victorian Certificate of Education, English subject (henceforth V.C.E. English), recently revised and introduced at the outset of this study. Exploring the relationship between literature and English is a familiar enterprise in educational research. However, privileging teachers’ narratives, as storied accounts of experience, and inquiring into these through discourse analysis, is an endeavour to understand this relationship in more detail.

English subjects are diverse; they are configured differently in response to the unique demands of their contexts. Green and Beavis (1996) recognise this plurality of English, using the term ‘English subjects’ in their review of English curriculum histories to describe the diverse state of English subjects, influenced by different historical perspectives, local contexts, discourses and curriculum developments. Despite the diversity of these constructions, there are also lines of commonalities that bring these subjects into association through core concerns. Whilst English in Victoria is configured differently to other constructions across Australian states and in comparison to overseas locations, its efficacy as a research site therefore, remains. English curriculum histories outside the Australian context (e.g. Dixon, 1967; Hunter, 1988; Mathieson, 1975; Peel, 2000a) suggest English subjects continually grapple with key debates around literacy, language, and significantly in terms of this study, around literature. Examining the condition of English in any specific context therefore, has the potential to open, contribute to and expand debates that inform English subjects. Although the senior English subject studied in the V.C.E. has a unique identity; and is configured and located in a distinct context, many of the issues and tensions influencing its (re)formation highlight debates occurring elsewhere. One of these debates is about the significance of literature in English courses in an increasingly digital world, and in schools driven by standard based assessment regimes. Although comparisons between Australia and England must be treated cautiously, literature matters to teachers of English across contexts, although understandings of what constitutes literature and its place...
alongside other texts and traditions might be understood quite differently. Goodwyn’s (2012) national survey of teachers in England, for example, found that literature mattered to English teachers in secondary schools, particularly those creative and personal dimensions of literary practice many felt had diminished. Whilst this study is too small to generate the depth of discussion larger studies like Goodwyn’s achieve, it is an important contribution to understanding the relationship between literature and English, examined through the lens of V.C.E. English and the voices of teachers open to sharing their experiences of it. If literature does matter, then an understanding of why it matters is necessary to enhance the substance of literary debates and to inform curriculum development in Victoria and elsewhere.

In order to conceptualise the significance of literature in V.C.E. English, it is necessary to understand something about the tensions surrounding the subject when this study began. Prior to the revised Study Design for V.C.E. English being implemented in 2007 at Year 11 and Year 12 in 2008, furore erupted in the profession when a draft design suggested the study of four texts (including the option of one film) be reduced. A sense of alarm was triggered within the English profession in Victoria, fuelled by concerns that students might only read one sustained text, diminishing the perceived rigour, literary merit and reading experience traditionally associated with the subject. Others questioned whether the territory of English teaching had leaned too far toward a postmodern shift where “English is forced to assume a cultural burden it cannot reasonably bear” (Cooper, 2006, p. 60). Although students would have the option to study film and a range of other text types within the new Study Design, some in the profession saw this as the end of English as they had known it: a subject in which there is an established relationship with reading and print based literature. Whilst some argued that the inclusion of varied texts, including multimodal forms would yield deep insights into aesthetics, culture (Thompson, 2006), human experience and language (Cooper, 2006), the discussion, which ignited in the media, had a profound impact on professional debate (Devlin-Glass, 2006). The proposed design was over-turned and the current 2007-2015 course came into being. While it is not the focus of this thesis, it is worth acknowledging V.C.E. English was reviewed again in 2014, further embedding textual study at the centre of the new Study Design to be implemented in 2016.

In its current form V.C.E. English is a two-year program, which is compulsory for all students to study in their final two years of secondary school unless they are undertaking an equivalent study of English Language or Literature or Foundation English (Units 1 and 2 only). While some schools offer the specialist subject, V.C.E. Literature, for some students V.C.E. English provides their only opportunity to encounter texts with literary merit. The first year is divided into two semester units of study, usually undertaken in Year 11 (students’ penultimate senior year). Units 1 and 2, which are studied in the first year, introduce students to the learning
outcomes that continue into Units 3 and 4 undertaken in Year 12. In Year 11 all coursework is designed and internally assessed in accordance with the guidelines established in the Study Design (V.C.A.A., 2006a). In Year 12 coursework is aligned with the Outcomes in the Study Design. School Assessed Coursework (S.A.C) contributes 50% to the students’ Study Score, while the remaining 50% is derived from an externally administered and assessed examination. There are three Areas of Study in V.C.E. English, and the culminating examination assesses all three. Area of Study One: Reading and Responding, might generally be understood as text response. Students study the themes, characters and an understanding of the ideas, in the set texts, reflecting on the structures, features and conventions employed by authors to create meaning. In Area of Study Two: Creating and Presenting, (sometimes referred to by the shorthand term: ‘Context’) students study their chosen Context, chosen from ‘Encountering Conflict’, ‘Whose Reality’, ‘Identity and Belonging’ or ‘The Imaginative Landscape’. Students read and view two texts (one may include a film if not already included in Area of Study One) using them as a basis for exploring the Context. In contrast to the analytical text response essay assessed in Area of Study One, students write a creative, expository or persuasive piece that shows a consideration of audience, purpose, the set text and Context. The final Area of Study: Using Language to Persuade, focuses on non-literary text types, requiring students to explore how language is used to create meaning and persuade an audience. Students are encouraged to respond orally and in written form, completing analysis tasks and an oral presentation of their point of view on an issue. As can be seen from the description of the course, there is an opportunity to study literature in Area of Study One, and to read or view literary texts to inform a sustained piece of writing in Area of Study Two. The text list published by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (V.C.A.A., 2008), from which schools select the four texts to be studied in Units 3 and 4, provides a range of genres including poetry, plays, short stories, novels and more recently, multimodal texts that includes graphic novels. Selections on the list encompass literary texts and other fiction, in addition to non-fiction titles.

In order to understand the present state of the V.C.E. English curriculum, in other words to create an ethnography of the present, this thesis focused both narratologically and discursively on teachers’ (re)constructions of literature within it. Part of the challenge of this study from its outset was the desire to examine teachers’ accounts from the emic and etic perspectives, to understand teachers’ “textual practice, pedagogy, and political subjectivity” and the elements that united them (Green, 2008, p. 42). To contrast teachers’ subjectivities, and to critically account for these, was therefore, part of a research enterprise concerned with re-constructing how teachers interpret and conceptualise literary forms of English. In order to maintain the integrity of the research, this meant acknowledging the influence of past traditions and teachers’ predictions about the future on how they conceive what English has been, comprises and will become.
A view of curriculum as a socially mediated construction, as opposed to fixed and imposed practice was central to the study’s development. In asking teachers to share their stories, and treating these as a microcosm of potential viewpoints and positions others in the profession might share, the inquiry needed to acknowledge this reflexivity. Whilst the V.C.E. English Study Design was treated as the reference point for curriculum – its expected aims, outcomes and requirements, it was the ‘hidden’ curriculum – the teachers’ individual and collective interpretations of these – that was explored. Questioning how teachers view literary English therefore, became about seeing the curriculum as a “representation…to expose and question codes, conventions, stylistics and artifices through which they are produced” (Da Silva, 1999, p. 30 cited Green, 2010, p. 465). Contemporary English practitioners are both aware of, and part of, the shifting tensions in the curriculum, as the role of literature and its associated practices are contested and juxtaposed to new forms of textuality and competing theories. Although the centrality of literature within English has often been debated, inherently the English subjects in Victoria have evolved into textually rich subjects, responding to changes in language, media, culture, communication and text. One of the most profound changes has been the influence of an omnipresent global future, necessitating a democratic, and ethical English subject, informing how teachers conceptualise their curriculum. Educational research, in this context, needs to consider the possible reformations of the English subjects, not only in light of the past but also in terms of the continued possibilities the future evokes. The landscape of 21st century English subjects is dynamic and rapidly evolving, positioning the teacher as “a bringer of new things… tempted... by the safe harbour of literature but for whom a newer world offers new possibilities” (Goodwyn, 2000, p. 4). This research is situated in the new world of English in Victoria, well into the second decade of the millennium. It is cognisant of past traditions and forward looking in considering what the state of literature within mainstream English in Victoria has evolved to be, and what it might become. The primary aim of the study is to elucidate how literary forms of English are constructed within the V.C.E. English curriculum by teachers who are responsible for its classroom enactment.

Based on a series of three narrative and ethnographic style interviews with eight Year 12 Victorian English teachers, this study ultimately examines how teachers (re)construct their perspectives and approaches to literature in light of past traditions, current debates and unfolding futures. Teachers’ sense of professional identity is expressed in ways that are individual and collaborative (Beavis, 1998; Goodwyn, 2004; Kamler & Comber, 2004). This study therefore, valorises the praxis, or working knowledge, of individual teachers, foregrounding the patterns, motifs and resonant themes expressed. The research moves beyond the idea of an imposed curriculum to a deeper valuing of the teachers’ personal and professional experiences of English teaching. Their perspectives on literature, reading, text and response, elucidate the multi-faceted ways English is conceived. Research of this kind is a relational,
social practice, yielding a portrait of how the V.C.E. English subject is constructed by these teachers, and the ideologies that underpin their viewpoints. Narrative inquiry elicits stories that show the interplay between what is valued and enacted in English, and the personal and professional aspects of the storyteller’s identity. Discursively, the ideological positions framing teachers’ responses, specifically the language and metaphors that convey these, create a portrait of subjects in a continual state of (re)creation in an age Bauman (2011) describes as a “self propelling, self-intensifying” (p. 11) liquid form of modernity.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE

In accepting a view of English subjects as contested territories, and the ideas informing their construction as ideological, the thesis is specifically interested in the ways teachers conceive their subject, and therefore, value and shape textual practices. A teacher’s own sense of the aesthetic, her beliefs about literature, her advocacy of what English should be, and how she sees herself in relation to literary debates, are highly influential to how she constructs literary practice. As a teacher of Victorian Certificate of Education (V.C.E.) English and Literature I am interested in teachers’ stories, particularly the relationship between teachers’ interpretation of curriculum and their constructions of literary practices. The implementation of the revised Study Design, implemented in 2008, for Units 3/4 English in Victoria provided an opportunity to examine the nature of this relationship. The new Reading and Responding area of study focused on “the reading of a range of literary texts to develop critical and supported responses” (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 24). Furthermore, the Creating and Presenting task emphasised “reading and writing and their interconnection” explicitly encouraging teachers to provide “students with opportunities to read other texts – print, non-print and multimodal – that explore ideas and/or arguments associated with the selected Context” (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 25).

Several questions focused the inquiry, which are the foundation of Chapters Six to Nine. Is literature still seen to be part of English in 21st century English practice? What significance do literary Englishes have in preparing students for global futures? How do teachers’ perspectives on English, and its purpose position literature alongside other textual practices? How do teachers discursively adopt, challenge or oppose debates about reading and literature? What are the common themes and discordant tensions in the relationship between literature, text and response in a Senior English curriculum?

To elicit deeper understandings of these main questions, the interviews focused on exploring core dimensions of teachers’ beliefs, ideals and practices in terms of text and response in V.C.E. English. These questions were also connected to the wider ideas teachers see as influencing the formation of English as a senior school subject and its greater purpose. To what degree is literature seen as represented in the documented V.C.E. English curriculum? How do teachers’
own literary valuing or devaluing of literature shape its role and representation in English? When teachers are positioned to work with texts in new ways, do they maintain what is familiar or somehow adapt to the changes envisaged? Do teachers conceptualise their approach to literature and its associated practices differently? How are teachers’ reflections on their practices discursively shaped by historical discourses of English and literary schools of thought? Is the role of literature in V.C.E. English one that can be collectively defined around resonant themes or does it take many forms as a measure of the teachers’ personal response? How do global discourses to do with citizenship, culture and the aesthetic connect to the teachers’ constructions of literary English subjects?

This study is inherently embedded in a contemporary educational climate that asks challenging questions about the role teachers have in defining the value and practice of literature in the English curriculum and in making decisions about what its future might be. The effect of this relationship, how teachers construct the subject in response to shifting contexts, is evident through their experience of change within the V.C.E. English curriculum. The teachers were acting as agents in curriculum design, using policy and documentation to stimulate ways of thinking critically and creatively about literary content and issues of identity, citizenship, and the academic purpose of textual practice (Dixon, 2012). Their responses particularly yield a rich portrait of the teachers’ literary views and diverse constructions of literature within V.C.E. English as they grappled with interpretation, (re)negotiated and enacted practices in response to a new Study Design.

1.2 RATIONALE: INQUIRING INTO LITERARY ENGLISH

Historical studies show that English subjects in any given place and in any era are fraught with tensions and disparities (Beavis, 1996; Misson, 2012; Peel, Patterson & Gerlach, 2000). The socio-political tensions and innovations out of which curriculum policies and discourses are born shape the classroom as a microcosm of society. The teachers’ role in negotiating this nexus between the interior world of the subject and the exterior world, to which it responds, shapes English subjects in multiple ways. Whilst one or more strands of thought dominate how the subject is configured in policy, how the subject is configured in reality by schools and teachers reveals a subject that is open to many readings, “configured in all sorts of ways, with different emphases, and the particular temper of the times” (Misson, 2012, p. 27). A plural view of English, as opposed to a singular, fixed construction of a universal English subject is therefore, closer to the realities of practice. Conceiving the English subjects as configured and reconfigured across physical, temporal and intellectual spaces in this way, enables the researcher to think critically about how teachers situate their readings of the subject. The teacher’s agency, as a professionally and personally invested stakeholder, has a profound impact on how she determines her own practice, against a broader view of what she believes English
encompasses. The design of this study reflects an interest in this idea of sociality; that teachers’ personal perceptions of English are constituted in terms of socially mediated language, ideas and negotiated meanings. To understand how V.C.E. English might be constructed in literary ways is embodied in a search to also trace the historical curriculum shifts, established discourses and subjectivities that inform these.

V.C.E. English, like other English subjects, is theoretically positioned by ideological constructions of what English should achieve and what its central content ought to be. These strong theoretical frames underpin how teachers conceive their subject and operate discursively within it. They are reinforced through the practices of reading, interpretation and response teachers valorise. There is an inevitable contestation about content in times of change, however, these conflicts resonate more deeply in a profession that is experiencing unprecedented social, technological and global changes. Modern English subjects are critical and creative spaces where a range of fields and disciplines intersect to create diverse textual, linguistic and cultural experiences for students. Culture and media studies co-exist with language and literary studies in ways that reflect an era of democratic rhetoric (Green, 2008). Victorian teachers are aware that Junior and Middle school English subjects have been revised too as part of the Australian Curriculum, creating new possibilities and possible limitations in a subject that has previously known State, and to some degree, teacher autonomy. There are two lines of delineation informing contemporary constructions; the immediate demands prompted by rapid change, and the contingency of a future that is unknown and undefined (Misson, 2012). Teachers are being positioned by these changes to simultaneously reimagine the English subjects and the future their students will inhabit. This act of re-imagining the future reconfigures the ways teachers might think about the relationship between individuals, texts and society, particularly if “we model our stories on the stories others tell us [so they] come to constitute our being” (Misson, 1998, p. 105).

Literature is inextricably tied to decisions about what English is and what its purpose should be. English as a Victorian subject has grown significantly since its inception, informed by perspectives on nationalism, cultural studies, literacy and more recently, democratic globalization. With each adaptation of English in Victoria, the role of literature has remained part of its configuration, debated and nuanced as culture wars played out. The significant development of literature is particularly evident through comparisons of English education in Victoria in the 21st century to its 19th century antecedents. Amidst the early years of national fervour English education was valued as moralising force for creating good citizens (Patterson, 2000a). Students’ exposure to literary culture within English, however, was overshadowed by moral and religious debates, evident in the composition and treatment of School Readers. Furthermore, ‘reading’ constituted practices that were less focused on ‘literary’ experience and
more closely based on rote and repetition (Beavis, 1996), appropriate to an educational commitment to ensuring labour forces attained literacy. This is not to suggest literature wasn't important. The appointment of teachers who could provide a literary education in addition to moral efficacy was a criterion for employment (Bessant, 1983). Furthermore, students in Victoria were exposed to literature, although their experiences of it differed across state and private school systems.

Although a literary approach to teaching literature was a later development in English education, the place of Literature matured considerably across the 19th and early 20th centuries expanding to encompass cultural ideals, humanist values and tensions around language and literacy. In the 21st century the influence of these developments is evident in the treatment of Literature as a separate strand in the Australian Curriculum and options in V.C.E. to study a separate subject named ‘Literature’. Literature remains part of the social, cultural and political set of expectations about what English subjects should comprise and what students might gain through its study. Now as democratic ideologies, globalization and multimodality take hold, V.C.E. English has broadened to encompass new forms of textuality and contemporary aims. In contrast to the nationalistic, religious and moral overtures of 19th century imaginings, V.C.E. English is a subject directed at helping young people become global citizens and designers of meaning. Of course, to some degree this is an overgeneralisation; the relationship between literary practice and the role of English in Victoria is never so easily ascribed. However, there is an indelible link between broader sociopolitical discourses about the world and subsequent theorisation about how students should read, write and reimagine the world through texts. To some degree literary practices are being shaped by new discourses, and in other ways remain steeped in an historical view of the subject.

There is an inevitable circularity in literary debates about English, such that teachers not only encounter new constructions of English, but also reinventions of those that have gone before. An important example of this is the Romantic discourses that position the English teacher as a spiritual and moral figure of enlightenment. These Romantic dispositions are a reconfiguration of earlier humanist traditions; a construction of a subject instrumental in “changing minds [through] culture and community, not simply rationality” (Pike, 2012, p. 251). This view of English as entering a new age of Enlightenment ideologically asserts a valuing of literature above non-literary forms. Literature is a source for illuminating, or at least conceptualising the world in new ways. These types of romantic constructions are situated alongside powerful democratic discourses that overtly embody visions of English subjects, which promote a culture of imagination and ethics. Literature in this sense is viewed as having a transformative power by which individuals become socialised into ways of being in the world and into an understanding of the human condition. One of the principal questions this study was always
concerned with was whether these romantic, democratic ideals influence literary practice in V.C.E. English. Amidst the pressures of an externally driven assessment regime and documented outcomes, it is telling to question how approaches to literary appreciation and the aesthetic are juxtaposed to other traditions. Reading literature constitutes only one aspect of textual practice amidst diverse reading and writing experiences embedded in V.C.E. English. The research is inevitably interested in how literary practices are contextualised and contested by other textual practices, and how these potentially provoke deeper readings, or evoke new understandings, of literary texts in the classroom. Goodwyn (2010) suggests there is a possibility for the aesthetic to coexist with the critical turn in English subjects, and perhaps for literary reading to provide a model for the future.

This study must also concern itself in some way with literary theories and how teachers’ consciously or subconsciously use these as lenses for valuing and practicing particular kinds of literary reading. Literary theories, alongside other social discourses in the English curriculum, inform how teachers view the meanings of texts and the representations of human experience these depict. By critically examining teachers’ beliefs in terms of literary theory and discourse, the ideological frames informing teachers’ diverse constructions of English are brought to light. Underpinning this research is a view of contemporary English subjects as founded on a commitment to “learning that is creative as well as critical, turning potentially passive reading into thoroughly engaged acts of writing and rewriting” (Pope, 2008, p. 29). This necessitates examining how teachers perceive literature’s role in shaping new critical formations of the subject, and also how other textual traditions are envisioned too. Whilst a close reading of literature has the potential to help individuals to mediate social relationships, constituting a ‘literary sociability’ (McLean Davies, Doecke & Mead, 2013), the technological revolution is likewise affecting how individuals interact with texts and others. While some teachers suggest the future requires a sophisticated literacy, developed through a close reading of masters (Holbrook, 2013), others argue that it is online literatures that provide “almost unimaginable possibilities for enriching our classrooms” (Ruzich, 2012, p. 204). This relationship between traditional print-based literatures and canons, and new literatures is inextricably embedded in how teachers construct not only a view of a literary English subject, but also how they define literature too.

1.3 RESEARCH OVERVIEW: INQUIRY INTO V.C.E. ENGLISH

This study is interested in teachers’ perceptions of a lived curriculum; one that they shape and are in turn shaped by. Their constructions of literature are framed by the wider importance of the English subject as a history of ideas, cultures, texts and understandings. Recognising the complexity of the teachers’ role in English involves actively valourising their narratives and using these to elicit greater insight into the actual practices of their teaching. It is an approach
that resists simplistic constructions of the stated curriculum and the accusations of public blame for falling standards (Goodson, 2003). In this study I reconstruct the teachers’ narratives, with a particular emphasis on highlighting the recurring language, themes and metaphors that critically frame their thinking. The teachers’ stories are treated both as narratives and sites of discourse that can be analysed in ways similar to Foucault’s genealogy of the present, as “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges [and] discourses” (Foucault, 1980, p. 117) to locate how teachers thematically construct a view of their subject and themselves as teachers of it, within the broader context of the traditions and practices that constitute a history of English teaching.

How teachers construct their perspectives on literary English is significant; both the purposeful and subconscious inclusions and omissions arising in teachers’ reflections reveal how they subjectively see English, define literature and perceive the future relevance of both. Inquiring into teacher perception of practice is concerned with locating the ideological discourses and ideas in which these are embedded. A view of ‘history as discourse’ (Green, 2003) problematizes how social changes, ideological shifts and curriculum changes influence teacher subjectivity. Teachers are discursively positioned within these ongoing debates, which impact on how they interpret and shape their teaching practice. The English classroom becomes the microcosm of society, and the practices enacted, a representation of the diverse possibilities of a democratic subject. However, as Patterson (2000a) points out, despite the rhetoric of progressive curriculum policy, there is often an absence of real change in the ways English can be infinitely constituted. This complex nature of English as a subject simultaneously distinguished by its discontinuities in specific contexts, yet signified by its continuities around core concerns to do with textuality and language, makes it all the more integral for research to represent teachers’ voices. Although V.C.E. English constitutes a specific approach to literature and language, exploring this site reveals the tensions and concerns that are similarly debated in the broader Australian context and communities elsewhere.

The V.C.E. English curriculum referred to throughout this study is generically defined by the ideas, tasks and rationale established in the Study Design. Such a narrow view of curriculum is not ideal, as teachers’ responses to curriculum are socially and ideologically mediated by other texts, practices, and traditions. However, the Study Design is the formal publication of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (the V.C.A.A.), and it is used here to frame what constitutes the literary content, and associated reading and writing practices in V.C.E. English. The V.C.E. English Study Design, and published V.C.A.A. Text List establish a context that enables close examination of literature-based practice, including text selection and assessment requirements. In particular, V.C.E. English provides a site to elucidate and critique how teachers construct literary forms of English in response to democratic values of global
citizenship articulated in the Study Design. Literature, in modern constructions of English subjects, exists alongside greater moral and socially cohesive practices (Sawyer, 2006). The indelible link between literature and these broader ideological, moral and spiritual discourses is a relationship that has historically influenced the English subjects in Victoria, and continues to resonate in contemporary times. The local ‘site’ of V.C.E. English is contextualised in terms of broader democratic and theoretical aims that resist narrow prescriptivist definitions of curriculum. As technologies bridge the divide of geographical isolation more demands of the English subject and its teachers as purveyors of literary, cultural and linguistic knowledge are made. The language of the Study Design foregrounds this nexus of literacy, literature, culture and aesthetic:

The study of English encourages the development of literate individuals capable of critical and imaginative thinking, aesthetic appreciation and creativity. (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 7)

The Victorian English curriculum has emerged from a contentious past and is being shaped by forward-looking speculations about ICT, multimodality and global participation. How teachers of Year 12 English respond to ongoing debates about literature and English policy are part of this larger continuum of curriculum change. As teachers consider the future landscape of literary English, they encounter too the influences of a global, ethics-based curriculum, negotiating concerns with culture, the aesthetic and critical practice. English subjects are not simply reproductions of the past; they are reconceptualised in response to these. If English disciplines are “constantly subject to the “law of recontextualisation’ because [they] take on different forms in different contexts” (Durrant, 2004, p. 6), a local research site that elucidates these contributing factors is needed. English has changed considerably since its inception in the late 19th century, as curriculum shifts reconfigured the textual landscape and reprised debates about literature and its place in English. Despite these shifts literature has maintained a presence in 21st century discourses on English education in Victoria, and has certainly been framed as significant in the advent of the Australian Curriculum. Literature is regarded as contributing to the aims of helping students become “confident communicators, imaginative thinkers and informed citizens…[and] ethical, thoughtful, informed and active members of society” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [A.C.A.R.A.], 2012, p. 3). While the V.C.E. English Study Design omits specific reference to literature, the Creating and Presenting Outcome in Unit 4 clearly articulates the importance of literary study.

Students will read these texts in order to identify, discuss and analyse ideas and/or arguments associated with the selected Context. They will reflect on the ideas and/or arguments suggested by these texts, explore the relationship between purpose, form, audience and language, and examine the choices made
by authors in order to construct meaning. Students will then draw on the ideas and/or arguments they have gained from the texts studied to construct their own texts...and explain their own decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context. (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 25)

The importance of literary texts in V.C.E. English is also evident in the publication of the V.C.A.A. text selection list that is clearly dominated by print based texts, with the inclusion of canonical works from the Romantic, Regency, Victorian, Elizabethan and Greek traditions. Furthermore, the valued presence of literature and other textual forms was apparent in the furore described earlier amid claims the proposed V.C.E. English course for 2007-2015 precluded substantial reading. Following the ‘post-modern lite debate’ (Thompson, 2006) the revised course included two texts studied for the purpose of traditional text and response (in Reading and Responding), and two additional texts to inform students written responses (in Creating and Presenting) to universal Contexts. Encompassed in the Design was a clear positioning of literary practices alongside other textual experiences, which broaden the possibilities for students to understand more deeply the diverse ways meaning is represented in society. However, it is perhaps significant too that practices of critique and response are not limited to a study of literature alone. The word ‘text’ is stated throughout the document, whilst literature is mentioned seven times and only in the reference list, possibly suggesting V.C.E. English has a rich textual tradition of which literature is only a part.

Reading, thinking and responding to the world relies on students’ appreciation of language, aesthetics and textual form. A focus on textual study in V.C.E. English is therefore, inherently tied to explorations of language and meaning. This emphasis on meaning is framed as pertinent to participation in academic, social and civic domains. The stated aims underpinning V.C.E. English are broad, encompassing aims to promote democratic citizenship, workforce participation, literacy and personal growth. Indeed, the opening lines of the rationale states that the English subject underpins “productive participation in a democratic society” (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 7) and later asserts it should help students “recognise the relationship between language and ideas, and the role of language in developing the capacity to express ideas” (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 8). As a research site, V.C.E. English provides a space to critically examine the interplay between language and literature, and the ideological discourses framing teachers’ perspectives. Selecting this site is an acknowledgement that the connection between literature and language and curriculum design is ideological. Literary practices are embedded in a subject that overtly aims to empower the individual to organise and critique her view of the world and its inequities. This is evident in the description of the Outcome for Reading and Responding, the more traditional approach to text and response. The first Outcome is described as focused on:
Reading of a range of literary texts to develop critical and supported responses… Students examine the structures, features and conventions used by authors of a range of selected texts to construct meaning. They identify, discuss and analyse these in order to explain how meaning is constructed through textual elements such as language and images. They also examine the ways in which the same text is open to different interpretations by different readers; for example, the ways in which a text can be read differently in a different time, place or culture. (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 24)

The description of Reading and Responding conveyed in the Study Design exhibits an ambitious view of English that seems to be about equipping students to fully participate in literary culture and the social, professional and personal aspects of their adult lives (Misson, 2005; Misson, 2012). The dynamic nature of this relationship between culture, text, language and readers is further embedded in the explicit focus of Creating and Presenting concerned with “reading and writing and their interconnection”. Students’ ability to inference the ideas and arguments in literary texts and film, supported by wide reading of other materials, is an essential focus. Understanding the sophisticated expression of worldly ideas in substantial texts is seen as encouraging students to “analyse in writing their decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context” (V.C.A.A., 2006a, p. 25). How teachers conceptualise these pragmatic and ideological aims, and enter into debates about the role of texts in meeting these, can potentially configure the English subject in multiple ways across the State, within their schools and in their classrooms. Teachers in Australia possess greater autonomy in processes of text selection, pedagogy and assessment design, than their overseas counterparts (Goodwyn, 2012). This autonomy creates a landscape of subjectivities in which V.C.E. English is discursively constructed and enacted in Victoria.

1.4 CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD

This study inevitably encountered the nexus between how teachers frame literary Englishes in context of past traditions, and in response to future predictions. The revised V.C.E. English Study Design contentiously came into being following lengthy considerations of what English as a modern Victorian subject is, what it should promote, and the types of material it ought to include. These considerations resonate throughout teachers’ reflections, influencing how they see the role of language, aesthetics and literature in V.C.E. English. Foremost, this context enabled examination of how teachers discursively shape, resist or re-imagine the teaching of literature within V.C.E. English, as they prepare students for adult life in a global village. Many teachers spoke about the course changes as a time for reframing their thinking about English and what matters most to them. Amidst course changes teachers were particularly positioned to re-examine their understandings of text and response. How they conceptualised their practice
and articulated this in relation to past and new debates was significant. The teachers’
interpretation of changes and reactions to new ideas about reading and responding, were
partially influenced by their prior personal and professional experiences of literature.
Researching teachers’ conceptualizations of textual practice, in the event of curriculum change,
significantly highlighted the complex role of the individual teacher in negotiating text selection,
and approaches to reading and response (Goodson, 2003; McLean Davies, 2012; Patterson
2000a). Furthermore, it highlighted the teachers’ crucial contribution to democratic contexts;
through teaching ways of reading that enable students to critically engage with a diverse array
of literatures and canons (Hateley, 2013). As Patterson (2000c) and Peel (2000b) note, the
contemporary English teacher is someone who is versed in linguistics and knowledge of
disciplines, which shape her as a specialist of language, contexts and communication, as well as
of literary text. This inevitably impacts on the role of the teacher, propelling her to move outside
the traditional constructions of her subject area and adapt textual practices in specialized and
meaningful ways.

Teachers’ responses to literary practices are as problematic as the curriculum that frames the
work they do. Teachers have a remarkable sense of responsibility for shaping literary practices
in ways that move beyond responding to curriculum initiatives to encompass the learning, social
and ethical needs of their students. For Year 12 teachers issues of autonomy and subjectivity
may not seem as significant as they otherwise would because the assessment is externally
driven. Furthermore, the V.C.A.A. text lists limit teachers’ freedom to decide what literature, or
by extension texts, are worthy of inclusion. However, curriculum is not static or staid and
teacher subjectivity is not negated by the policies and documents of assessment authorities. To
“envisage a possible future for English characterized by the democratic possibilities of
difference and diversity” (Howie, 2008a, p. 76) begins with asking teachers to conceptualise
their teaching practices. Furthermore, any construction of literary reading needs to acknowledge
the interconnected relationship this has to teachers’ professional lives and to their own identities
as readers (Goodwyn, 2010). This intricate interplay of teachers’ subjectivities and discursive
positioning is what yields insight into the lived curriculum; the world of English teaching and
literature these teachers inhabit.

1.5 SUMMARY AND THESIS STRUCTURE

Chapter One began with a synopsis of the research, establishing the overall purpose to explore
teachers’ diverse constructions of literature within V.C.E. English employing narrative method
and discourse analysis. A rationale was included to provide a knowledge framework for
establishing the inquiry: what are the English subjects and more importantly, what is the
relationship of literature to these. Following on from the discussion of the literary dimensions of
English, the chapter presented an overview of V.C.E. English as a research site, outlining the
place of literature within the Study Design and contextualising approaches to reading and writing within the course. The chapter concluded with a summary of the contribution this research potentially makes to the field, recognising the teachers’ significant role in shaping understandings of literary and other textual practices in English.

The dissertation continues in Chapter Two with an historical review to further establish the subject’s context framing teachers’ perspectives on literature and English. Chapter Three specifically focuses on the literary themes and discourses, which potentially contribute to teachers’ constructions of English. Chapters Four and Five are concerned with issues of epistemology and method, providing a framework for understanding the research design, and how it enabled teachers’ reflections to be examined in light of narrative and discourse perspectives. Chapters Six to Nine are the analysis and discussion chapters, beginning with teachers’ perceptions on what English subjects are (Chapter Six) and then moving into a chapter on how they construct a view of literature and its connection to English teaching (Chapter Seven). Chapter Eight examines the literary discourses underpinning teachers’ views of reading and literature in English, touching on the ways of knowing and responding valorized. Chapter Nine examines teachers’ beliefs about the future of English and the challenges to literature in a technological, global environment. The thesis concludes with Chapter Ten, drawing together the key themes and ideas pertinent to how teachers construct a view of literary English and ending with a summary of the study’s contribution to the field.
CHAPTER TWO

PERSPECTIVES INFORMING ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

2.0 INTRODUCTION

English is a highly disputed territory, in which notions of language, literature and text compete for representation in the overwhelming pursuit to produce some understanding of common practice. Encountering the literature surrounding English practice is as immensely engaging as it is provoking, for it refutes conceptualisations of fixed commonality, instead revealing the subject to be an unstable and ongoing project of “infinite possibilities, embracing differences” (Howie, 2008b). If English subjects are historically unstable and socially situated, as much of the literature suggests, questions arise about how English is constructed and the direction it is moving in. However, to address the entirety of such a question, with due consideration of the different ways English is conceived, is beyond the scope of this thesis. The literature review presented here focuses instead on one particular area that contributes to the bigger picture: the role of literature as text and practice in constructions of English.

The discussion begins with an historical establishment of the subject in Victoria, drawing on connections to national and international developments where appropriate to contextualise these. The chapter is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of English subjects and their histories; it is partial in the sense that key developments are chosen to highlight the themes and tensions that frame this inquiry and inform teachers’ perspectives. Divided into three sections the chapter begins with an historical reflection on the early formations of English as a school subject in Victoria. From its historical establishment, the chapter turns to an examination of some of the key ideas and developments of English in the mid to late 20th century when some of the teachers whose voices are presented in this thesis were themselves students at school. The third section focuses on 21st century challenges to the status of literature in English, and envisages the future directions the subject might take.

English as a contemporary Victorian school subject is part of a broader historical heritage of understandings. To query how literature is placed within V.C.E. English requires delving into curriculum history. The literature review articulates the development of English curriculum in Australia, often in line with England’s influence, reflecting on the practices that are valued and contested at different times. Underpinning the review is an understanding that literary practices are inextricably tied to decisions about what English as a study should entail; it is informed by past traditions, fuelled by current theories and forward looking. Furthermore, the role of literature exists within a broader debate about the worth of English as a vehicle for exploring society and power, developing an appreciation of the aesthetic, and up-skilling young people for
a globalised future. Historical perspectives are powerful; they remind us of the circularity of
debates about English, inclusive of those about literature. We read the past not to reclaim former
territory, nor to romanticize its offerings; but rather as guidance to what questions we should be
asking of the role of literature and V.C.E. English now.

English has existed for more than a century in Australian schools and during this time has
experienced a metamorphosis from a subject strongly connected to its colonial origins to a
contemporary space encompassing new pedagogical and textual possibilities. Influenced by
mass globalisation, technology and multimodality it is a subject almost impossible to define, not
merely because change inevitably results in discontinuities, but more so because its continuities
are re-mapped to accommodate new texts and language practices. Furthermore, English covers a
broadth of language based arts, literacy practices and literary foundations (Beavis, 1996;
Misson, 2012; Patterson, 2000a). Researching English within such ambiguous structures is in
itself problematic. Historically, one of the few constants in Australian education is change,
which is certainly true when one considers the academic literature written about English.

The English subjects in Australia and elsewhere have always been contested and plagued,
perhaps rightly so, by discourses of classicism, aesthetics, ethics, and effective citizenship.

These historical and theoretical debates underpin current literary constructions of English in
Victoria, framing these as inheritance or resistance of past ideas. Contributions to the field are
reminders that past discourses and practices associated with literature continue to pervade our
contemporary understandings of the English subjects in a significant, although differentiated
light. Reading insights into English leads to a natural questioning of what has changed for
V.C.E. English in the 21st century and a realisation that regardless of its state, there has always
been some discernible trace of literature. Literature is part of the English subjects’ continuity
across place and time, although its role waxes and wanes amidst educational re formations. By
analysing the history of the subject, we can draw parallels to our own times; history becomes
one of the lenses for interpreting the role of literature in a V.C.E. English subject that is
ultimately forward looking.

The tensions surrounding English in the 1960s particularly serve as an interesting parallel to the
instability of literature and V.C.E. English in Victoria in the 21st century. ICT and new
technologies are changing the ways in which literature is defined and accessed, and
consequently diversifying the ways students respond to it. By thinking about the foundations of
English in Victoria as a genealogy of the past or ‘history-as-discourse’, its continuities and
 discontinuities are more clearly understood. Although this thesis does not draw extensively
from Foucault’s analytics, a view of discourse as “a practice that has its own forms of sequence
and succession” (Foucault, 1972, p. 169) acknowledges how individuals are positioned by the
experiences, language and practices of their societies, such that they learn its signifiers and in
Societies recruit us as subjects, subject us to their values and incite us to be responsible, accountable citizens eager… to give an account of ourselves in terms we have learned from the signifying practices of those societies themselves. (Belsey, 2002, p. 53)

From a Foucauldian perspective teachers approach literary instruction in ways that are judgemental about the knowledge and processes that count as valid for framing the world. However, caution is needed; power is not an entity to be possessed, rather an ongoing relation of struggle between ideas and experiences, such that all individuals have the potential to resist how they are positioned. Genealogy is a frame that enables academics, such as Green, Cormack & Reid (2000), Hunter (1988) and Patterson (2000a) who overtly work within this paradigm, to think in differing ways about the alternative views and values that shape English. Furthermore, by utilising a historical frame English subjects can be understood as constructions, founded upon discourses about the possibilities and problems of society, language, culture and text.

English is always in contestation and multifaceted, because it is both locally and globally situated within discourses about globalization, economy and educational politics. In Victoria, as in other places, English has been continuously reformed and reinvigorated to encompass new ideologies and society’s vision for the future. Simultaneously so much of the landscape, as a text-centric study, has remained the same. Indeed, some argue the continuities of this subject far outweigh its discontinuities. Patterson’s (2000a) belief in the absence of any real change despite the rhetoric is particularly evident in her analogy of the ship: “we can rearrange the deckchairs, but we cannot alter the course of the ship. But then why would we want to?” (p. 252). Green (2003) suggests an alternate view of English as a site that naturally comes into a state of contestation. Green divides curriculum into three areas; discourses, programmes and effects as the artefacts involved in the physical and ideological construction of a subject and its theoretical basis. To this he adds past, present and future, as a signifier as to how any construction is established, contested and changed. Green’s portrait of English is historically messy; it allows for discontinuities to be examined and continuities recognised. Most importantly Green’s view creates an intellectual space for my role as researcher in reviewing the themes, concerns and ideas that have historically informed English in Victoria.

2.1 English in Australia – 19th Century to Post War Formations

The development of English in Victoria can be historically traced through critical turns that are specific to its own unique context. Before the 19th century in England, the teaching of reading, writing, grammar and rhetoric existed, although these had yet to be institutionalised within an
English subject. Moral imperatives of the State and Church provided the direction and impetus for schooling, which was gradually usurped by the arrival of the 20th century and its concerns with social instability. Brass (2011) defines the early period of schooling in Australia, England, Canada and America as the extension of a classical idea from ancient scripture. The basis of education was the care and transformation of human souls. This vision of schooling was fuelled by Christian ideologies, in which authority figures were invested with the responsibility to morally and spiritually ensure an individual’s wellbeing. Reading Sunday School literature and scripture was valued as an experience that nurtured the soul. Furthermore, the world of stories and parables, imagery and aesthetics was central to this process of sympathetic awakening and moral transformation. This emphasis on caring for the spirit remained in later constructions of literature, significantly influenced by Romanticism and the transformative appeal of literary art and imagination. English teachers enacted practices they envisioned would enable individuals to govern themselves. This noble ambition was reliant on shaping the individual’s awareness of the soul through literary enlightenment, evident in Chubb’s (1902) view of literature and its effects:

Those musical and imaginative products which lodge more memorably and fatally in the hearts and minds of children than anything else, and determine their life-long habits of seeing and feeling…and more than the power of thought and knowledge, control their being. (p. 29)

The formative years of literary study in the late 19th and early 20th centuries highlight how anxieties about morality, identity and society continually impact on English practice and literature. The treatment of literature as a means for nurturing subjectivities – “emotions, tastes, desires [and] imagination” (Brass, 2011, p. 169) – ideologically connects Englishes across differing climes. Historically literary Englishes have been anchored in ideas associated with growth and transformation; and this is poignantly evident in the transition years of the late 19th to early 20th century. English in Australia evolved in a colonial setting, although it must be remembered that this was during the same time period when industrialisation swept through England. Although caution is needed in generalising between British and Australian contexts, the 19th century was a time of rapidly changing social and political economies in both places. This rapid social development procured a need to establish an education system that would provide for a literate mass labour force and a new commercial professional class. In Australia, an outpost of the British Empire built on the labour of convicts and the economy of free settlers, formative steps toward educating the masses were influenced by these literacy agendas. It is important to note, however, that compulsory schooling was not implemented in Victoria until 1872, and in the lead up to its establishment it was being shaped by a different agenda. The Victorian education system was developing in lines that reflected a preoccupation too with
religious instruction and morality, overshadowing other debates about what subjects should be at the heart of schooling (Beavis, 1996).

Peel’s (2000a) historical review of English in Britain during this time, however, does raise some important themes for thinking about the ways English is configured, and to some degree, the ways it was constructed in Victoria too. In the early period of 19th century education there was an emphasis on rhetoric and oral culture, encapsulating values reminiscent of Ancient Roman and Greek traditions. By the middle of the 19th century skills of recitation, alongside other literacy practices of grammar, reading, composition, and literature, were being loosely organised under an umbrella of ‘English’. Whilst several key academic players contributed to the formation of English (Court, 1992), as modernity embraced a new culture of ‘high seriousness’ through the pursuit of materialism and Science, literary culture in England found its advocacy in Matthew Arnold. Arnold, a key proponent in the attempt to humanise schooling toward a ‘civilised aesthetic heritage’ advocated a seemingly unproblematic view of literature. Central to his vision was the study of classical masters and fine poetry as a catalyst for children’s personal and civic growth. As a poet, critic and school inspector he brought arguments about literature, aesthetics and education together, influencing the eventual formation of Subject English in Britain. The civilising characteristics that Arnold attributed to aesthetics emphasised a study of classical masters, reinforcing elitist notions of high culture. Despite Arnold’s intentions to counteract the malaise of modernity and unify culture, his liberal idealism failed to deliver the revolution it promised. However, his views on English education continued to significantly influence the ideological tone of 20th century literature studies in England, and in Australia too, evident in the positive reception to the Newbolt Report of 1921.

There is often an indelible link between English curriculum constructions and social developments. Patterson (2000a) articulates this nexus between English, literature and the ethical and moral formation of society in the following way:

The newly devised curriculum category, secondary English…was to draw upon these available techniques for self-formation, self-reflection and self-problematisation – from which it was envisaged, would emerge the sensitive, empathetic, and tolerant citizen, capable of self-regulation. (p. 236)

Although Patterson’s review of English developments is focused on the New South Wales (N.S.W.) curriculum context, it highlights how these unique tensions around identity played out in their Australian contexts. From the end of the 19th century to the start of the 20th century the direction of literary study was beginning to change in Victoria, incorporating less emphasis on grammar and rhetoric, and more on the literary aesthetic and moral precepts underpinning the treatment of literature. Before the Newbolt Report was introduced English education in Victoria
was already changing in response to the ‘New Education Movement’ and the influence of reforming Director of Education, Frank Tate (Patterson, 2000a). These aims of self-formation and self-reflection espoused in Patterson’s account of the purposes of English were a focus too of the Victorian system in which the study of poetry, composition and literature were important. Similar to Arnold, Tate believed even the poorest man should have the opportunity to go to university. His belief in education’s civilising potential is evident in claims he advocated state schooling should work toward:

Sowing seeds of fuller, broader, gentler life...aimed[ed] at turning children on the road towards becoming cultured men...imbued with high ideals of life and of life’s work. (Tate, 1893, pp. 31-32)

The idea of creating culture resonated in the reading materials students were exposed to, from the moralist excerpts in the Irish Readers, to the stories, poems and other materials in the Royal Readers (1890) and by 1928, the Victorian Readers. It is important to note, however, that even in the early formation of English studies in Victoria, there was a desire for students to be exposed to stories that represented distinctly Australian national identities, as opposed to British imperialism. The influence of Australia’s growing independence from her British counterpart is evident in the changing titles and content of school readers. The replacement of the Royal Readers with the Australian Readers in the 1890s, School Newspapers in 1896 and the Victorian Readers in 1928 signalled this discursive national turn in identity and toward a different consciousness. Beavis (1996) articulates this shift, using the development of the School Papers and later the Victorian Readers to describe how these “acted as a powerful vehicle in shaping and regulation of sensibility and subjectivity, in both pupils and teachers” (p. 21). The various editions of early readers, at first praised for their moral overtures, were soon criticised for their irrelevance to Australian cultural identity and the literacy needs of post-colonial citizens. In times of social change, issues of identity are paramount to a nation culturally establishing its consciousness: its ideals, institutions and values. By the 20th century ideological shifts in Australian society, a nation that had recently asserted its identity through Federation, were converging with a reimagining of literature and aesthetics in education. Whilst Australian literature would not become embedded in English subjects in Victoria until the mid-twentieth century, the curriculum was gradually evolving in response to British and domestic influences. The 20th century ‘New Education’ reform movement mentioned earlier was particularly significant in re-shaping education, providing the impetus for a new English model emphasising the Arts and cultural appreciation of the literary aesthetic (Patterson 2000a; Peel, 2000a).

The relationship between constructions of English, literature and society are important – they shape how teachers think about their subject and locate their identities within it. The identity
politics of powerful authorities such as governments and ministerial reports can significantly influence the course of English teaching and what is studied at the centre of these. The concept of identity politics used here stems from a sociological perspective on cultural theory. These politics can be thought of as both the ideological beliefs of a powerful authority and in this instance, the actions of that authority, to address social inequities through agendas of Nationalism, democracy or in more recent times, globalization (Hall, 2001). The dynamics of this relationship is particularly evident in discourses on English education that would come almost twenty years after the New Education Movement, surrounding the release of the Newbolt Report of 1921 (Ball, Kenny, & Gardiner, 1990; Beavis, 1996; Green, 1990; Peel, 2000a). History tells us that political constructions of social, ethical and moral identity continually and profoundly influence the way institutions shape educational policies. The Newbolt Report would significantly alter the emphasis on approaches to literature in English here in Victoria, although it was an initiative of the Board of Education in Great Britain.

The influence of the Newbolt Report is perhaps better understood in context of the state of Australian society at the time. Recently recovering from the aftermath of war, Australia in similar ways to England, was experiencing social change brought into being by changing demands of industries, financial instability and emigration. Throughout this period of socio-political disenchantment conceptualisations of English and the role of literature within it, reflected humanist ideals, particularly as signalled earlier, the creation of “men of culture [as] the true apostles of equality” (Arnold, 1869, p. 79). Literature’s humanising power was integral to these designs, affirming the values of national consciousness and identity (Beavis, 2009). However, whilst issues of identity were important, a more rigorous study of Australian literature had yet to be established. While Australian stories increasingly became part of the reading matter given to students, in, for example, the Victorian Readers (1928), British literature continued to be central in secondary schools, with the emphasis on English classics and tradition in Victorian schools, reflective amongst other things of the influence of tertiary institutions on school curriculum.

Arnold’s cultural rhetoric was strongly evident within Victorian Secondary schools and English studies. Melbourne University, like all universities in Australia was established in the English tradition. Universities throughout the country determined the content of secondary school curriculum The English curriculum in Victoria therefore, supported a view of English literature as a strong basis upon which national education should be pursued, representing a philosophical intent to shape the future differently with greater consideration of ‘humane culture’ (Ball et al., 1990). The Newbolt Report (Board of Education, 1921) later overtly articulated this relationship between literature and citizenship through its advocacy that individuals, versed in the literary artefacts of national pride, and morally uplifted through engagement with ‘great’ literature,
would somehow be inspired to imagine and lead better lives. These early 20th century developments in English between the years of the New Education Movement and the Newbolt Report highlight how English in Victoria was gradually brought into being and influenced by moral and humanist discourses. Furthermore, it elucidates the ideals of a golden age, and of a civilised aesthetic that great literature articulated and inspired.

Literature, and the significant ideas it embodies, is important to English. This is particularly evident in examining its status at the turn of the Edwardian age. A brief comparison between English and Australian contexts elucidates the influences behind a shift in Victoria toward formalising English subjects and the content of these. The establishment of the English Association in Britain in 1906 particularly signalled a greater move toward formalising an English subject and the foundations underpinning literary study. Peel (2000a) points out numerous anxieties surrounding English, which were evident in Australian debates too, as curriculum developers sought to conceptualise the subject beyond the civilising paradigm advocated by Arnold. Creating a sense of the discipline’s identity and contribution to human knowledge was paramount as English competed with the rising appeal of Science as a central tenet of education. A study of literature, concerned with subjectivity and personal relations of self and others, however, could not be studied in the same way as Science (Patterson, 2000a).

Cormack (2008) in his review of South Australian English curriculum describes this unstable nature of English subjects in Australia and elsewhere as being marked by ‘enduring variability’. This discontinuity between subjects poses a challenge to curriculum historians, and I would extend, to those responsible for its development.

Whilst Science could be measured and assessed within defined parameters, constructions of English were already unstable and open to dispute. As a discipline focused on literature and culture, English concerned itself with metaphors, symbolism and intuitive ways of knowing. Educational change presented a paradox in which English was increasingly becoming part of a state apparatus of power, in similar ways to Science. Voices arose out of this contradiction, particularly after World War II, which would inspire a new generation of educators to reimagine English through lenses of culture and literary appreciation.

In the 1930s and 1940s F.R. Leavis and the Cambridge school of critics pursued an ideological vision of English as a study able to counteract cultural and intellectual impoverishment, and social divisiveness, through a rigorous study of great literature (Beavis, 2009; 1996; Green, 1990; Patterson, 2000a). The principal Leavisite aim was to promote social harmony through cultural cohesion, although it did not completely share the democratic view of Arnold’s earlier idealism. Whilst Leavis’ adherents argued English education should be inclusive of greater language and social needs, it never fully encompassed Arnold’s democratic view of literary sensibility. Unlike Arnold, Leavis suggested the cultivation of refined tastes was an ideal that
could not be achieved by all individuals in society (Peel, 2000a). Literary sensibility was something Leavis’ proponents envisioned as needing to be cultivated or trained at a time when the vision of society was forebodingly grim:

What effect can such training have against the multitudinous counter-influences – film, newspapers, advertising – indeed the whole world outside the classroom? Yet the very conditions that make literary education look so desperate are those, which make it more important than ever. (Leavis and Thompson 1933, p. 1)

Leavis’ vision for the modern world successfully augmented the importance of literature, aesthetics and culture within English. The humanising appeal of a literary education was its perceived ability to create “discerning people not just discerning readers” (Pike, 2003, p. 171). His view of a literary sensibility was constructed as an antidote to the materialism of a rapidly changing world. Whilst Leavis was not the sole critic of his generation, his school of thought profoundly shaped the aspirational tone of English subjects in England and Australia. The Leavisite view of the literary aesthetics’ influence in the formation of democratic citizenship was a particularly significant idea, in an era governed by social fear of totalitarian regimes. Paradoxically, whilst Leavis’ ideas were promoted as civilising ideals, they were often both elitist and problematic and thereby reminiscent of the problems with authority they claimed to circumvent. Detractors became disillusioned with the Cambridge School, perceiving the rhetoric of a “golden past of organic social unity [as aimed toward] an ever decreasing ‘cultured’ minority” (Ball et al., 1990, p. 56). Despite this criticism, Leavisite ideas continued to flourish in Victoria as elsewhere, reinforced by the Cambridge school’s search for Englishes that would support the creation of a new order of stability. English as a subject that is historically viewed as a great unifier, further consolidated its identity as the foundation of a modern curriculum. A focus on language and literary study was emphasised in courses built upon a vision of unity and social stability. English in Victoria was clearly divided into two distinct areas of study articulating this focus: English Expression and English Literature. Whilst the rhetoric of this age remained embedded in ideals around culture and aesthetics, it also represented a growing idealism concerned with social competencies and personal growth (Peel 2000a). The version of literary study valued in this age encouraged students to articulate their sense of pleasure in a personal appraisal of the aesthetic (Beavis, 1996).

2.2 CHALLENGES OF MODERNITY – MID 20TH CENTURY CONSTRUCTIONS

By the 1950s and 1960s in both England and Australia, new English subjects arose embracing attitudes to personal growth and democratic consciousness. This is not to suggest, however, that the image of English as a modern and socially transformative subject is a post 1960s construction. Rather it is an acknowledgement that many of the developments arising from this
period remain apparent in Australian English subjects today. Throughout the 20th century, English subjects in Australia flourished in an environment that enabled greater autonomy than their counterparts in England, although education in Australia still evolved around curriculum designs that were State controlled. Whilst some over-arching claims can be made for English in Australia throughout the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, it must also be duly remembered that English in Victoria had its own tensions and directions.

English as it exists in Victoria today is largely based on theoretical positions adopted in the post-1960s cultural revolution of English studies. From the years following the end of World War II until the mid 1960s, English changed very little, despite growing pressure for reform (Beavis, 1996). From the 1960s onwards particularly following the proceedings of the Dartmouth Conference, the English subjects in England and Australia reflected a significant shift away from an emphasis on reading toward a focus on writing. In England this new direction was borne out of frustrations with an approach to English in grammar schools, which privileged a minority, excluding the voices of working class children (Peel, 2000a). As Australia entered into a new state of modernity, this shift also reflected a nation’s intense yearning to assert a unique identity. Since the War had ended, Australia’s ideological ties to British identity had lessened. Australian English subjects, in similar ways to their British counterparts, were moving further away from cultural heritage models of English toward personal growth pedagogies. John Dixon, an influential contributor to the Dartmouth Conference, and reporter of its proceedings, documented this shift from Englishes inculcating a notion of ‘high’ culture toward personal growth models. A constructivist view of language was important in framing the New English model as a site of processes and activities, grounded by an ordering of experience. Dixon articulates this idea noting that through language we create representations of the world, “making it afresh, reshaping it, and bringing into new relationships all the old elements” (Dixon, 1967, p. 9).

Although English in Australian states continued to grow in their own directions, some influence of the London Institution of Education shaped the reformation of English, arguing against the imposition of ‘great literature’ in favour of authentic writing practice. In both Australia and England representations of canonical literature began to wane in a quest for authenticity, which valued students producing their own narrative understandings. Dixon (1967) in his report on the Dartmouth proceedings noted the tensions and values underpinning the study of literature at this time:

The traditional emphasis on cognitive growth (in ways of thinking) tends to focus attention away from equally important stages in the accommodation to modes of feeling, judging and evaluating that characterise the reading of literature (including students personal writing) (cited Dixon, 2009, p. 245).
Post Dartmouth the study of literature became valorised as part of a textual continuum that Sawyer (2004) describes as now encompassing a range of texts from gossip to high art. Particular importance was ascribed to exploring students’ own narratives of personal experience. The study of mass produced new text forms: popular magazines, glossy paperbacks and comics alongside other literature represented a post-Dartmouth commitment to growth pedagogy. At the heart of these English models, committed to growth pedagogy, was a focus on student centred experience. These colourful and imaginative forms were exciting in their possibilities, constituting new ways of reading for pleasure (Beavis, 1996; Patterson, 2000a). Inevitably, by displacing the canon and validating new forms of textuality, tensions arose around a perceived literary decline. These texts and new practices were seen as compromising the conventional valuing of the aesthetic and its strict moralizing force, which had been central to former constructions of English. This is not to suggest the dawn of the 20th century equated with the death of literature; rather understandings of text and response evolved in new directions. English subjects in England and Australia adapted new approaches to literary study, which encouraged individuals to personally explore and emotively respond to literature (Medway, 1990). Furthermore, the themes in literary texts were recognised as embedded concepts, encouraging students to reflect on the world of their inhabity.

The concept of self-reflexivity, articulated in the New English movement of the 1960s-1970s, focused more closely on the metacognitive and social learning processes of the individual. Post-Dartmouth, English in England and Australia was guided by new understandings of learning processes that significantly informed reading and writing practices. Britton’s (1970) work on language acquisition, learning and experience was particularly influential, informing a view of language as an instrument of learning (Peel 2000a; Thompson, 2004). This inter-relationship between language and experience is clearly evident, however in the mid 1950s rhetoric of the London Association’s aims of teaching English. The document, intended for schools in India under British imperialism, articulates the vision of the London English group and the founding notions that would inform New English a few years later:

The effect of language upon experience… is to deepen it, order it, and make it accessible. By language we acquire a measure of control over our own experience and thereby are able to learn from it… language helps us to think… similarly helps us to perceive and feel and act. (LATE, 1956, p. 2)

In Australia, Halliday’s (1973) work on language functions and Barnes’ (1976) arguments around oracy further reinforced the critical and experiential turn toward language. These developments around language were also supported by research in the field of cognitive psychology. Bruner, Piaget and Vgotsky’s views on the nature of learning were particularly influential, drawing together perspectives on the relationship between language and thought.
In broadening writing and oracy practices the emphasis on recitation, rhetoric and précis gave way to a new era of speaking and writing, for different purposes and authentic audiences (Peel, 2000a). This transformation of English, which encouraged imaginative and creative language practices, was pivotal to the development of English in Victoria, its traces clearly remaining today in the writing component of V.C.E. English and the middle years of the Australian Curriculum.

New constructions of English were informed by understandings of language processes in a subject regarded by some as amorphous and without a discernible body of content (Medway, 1990). This was a progressive vision of English that valued teachers’ freedom to construct their practices “in light of the changing conditions, new needs [and] unforeseen difficulties” (LATE, 1956, cited in Gibbons, 2013, p. 142). An emphasis on individual praxis, personal growth and creativity is evident in Dixon’s retrospective claims that:

> Teachers’ knowledge… is not static… but alive and growing through her entering into the experience of others (and her inner self), in reality and in the imagination (Dixon, 1975, p. 86).

From the personal growth pedagogies of the 1960s through to the 1990s emphasis on cultural studies, the personal growth pedagogy advocated by Dixon and his counterparts maintained a presence in English subjects. Paradoxically the impact was at times a critical resistance to the ideologies extolled in ‘Growth through English’, particularly in reference to the treatment of literature and literacy. Adherents of literature centred models perceived new literary approaches as part of a conflicting binary: experience-centred learning versus literature-centred curriculum. The broad definition of literature, which included students’ own narratives, was seen to particularly privilege the voices of the urban poor at the expense of other cultural understandings (Sawyer, 2004). In Australia, a broader definition of literary study proposed by Reid (1984), which advocated a ‘Workshop’ model of English as distinct from a ‘Gallery’ approach was particularly influential in shaping practice. Reid’s assertion that “a work of literature [is] not an object possessing special properties but as an act performed in a special context” (p. 17), emphasised the importance of engaging students as readers and writers in the production of meaning. Constructions of literature and English were shifting, supported by the 1970s turn toward critical literacy, which further emphasised an imperative focus on language, identity and power. Dialectically English offered approaches to language, which balanced what Freire (1974) described as the ‘language of critique’ and the ‘language of possibility’. Based on his work with semi-literate adults in Brazil, Freire envisioned critical literacy as a liberated platform for education. Language was valued as an instrument of imaginative possibilities, encouraging students to experience wonder and express insight into experience:
Human experience cannot be silent… to exist humanly is to name the world, to change it…. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (Freire, 1970, p. 88)

Whilst Freire’s work was primarily concerned with raising consciousness within underprivileged communities, it laid the foundations of future critical literacy developments in first world contexts (Morgan, 2004). In Australia, Mellor and Patterson (2004) also claimed the foundation of critical literacy stemmed from the influence of political and cultural theory particularly poststructuralism. This era of critical theory challenged ideas about readers, texts and interpretation, moving from personal response to deconstruction of multiple readings to “an embracing of the concepts of text, textuality and intertextuality” (p. 83). By the close of the 20th century, critical literacy consolidated its role within English subjects committed to understanding meaning and relations of power through language (Patterson, 2000b). Freirean approaches encouraged students to be ethnographers of culture, to “work against the myths that deform us” (Freire, 1997 cited Stevens, 2012, p.125). Post-Freirean constructions therefore, focused on raising consciousness and engaging in social action through understandings about society and language embedded in these. Contemporary constructions further emphasised that all texts are created from a range of language options, and therefore open to multiple meanings (Morgan, 2004). Misson (2009) summarises this view on language:

There is a radical indeterminacy in language, and there is no final absolute meaning to a text, which is of course why the study of texts is so endlessly fascinating, and why classroom discussion around texts can be so invigorating. (p. 103)

The intense focus on language and critical literacy evident in late 20th century English education reflects similar concerns related to society and its power structures, which continue to inform English subjects today. While some media commentators saw the literacy agenda as potentially devaluing literary Englishes and the pleasure of aesthetic response (Freesmith, 2006), others within the English profession argued that critical literacy offered deeper understandings of the literary aesthetic. The kind of critical literacy Morgan advocates, for example, is about deepening approaches to texts that develop students’ ‘critical social imagination’ (2004, p. 110). The imagination, far from an abstract concept of fantasy and illusion, is one that represents a sociological imagining that encourages students to critically engage with issues of social justice. Morgan (2004) asserts the democratic potential of critical literacy to create imaginative English subjects that are "analytically critical, playfully inventive, aesthetically appreciative, performative [and] actively productive” (p. 110). Rather than diminishing literature, adherents argue that opportunity to critically engage with literary aesthetics is fundamental to democratic English agendas. The 20th century view of the aesthetic, carried forth into the millennium is one that asserts:
Language constitutes knowing… one cannot ignore the shaping force of language in a literary way in all text… the aesthetic is a different way of knowing, one in which the emotional is not subordinate to the rational, one which generalises by representing particulars (Misson, 2009, p. 109).

Constructions of English, built around critical literacy models, articulate a democratic agenda in which both literature and language are imbued with possibilities for transforming society. Critical English subjects particularly express a commitment to creating students who will become producers of meaning, capable of withstanding the mechanisms of oppressive powers in a technological millennium.

2.3 ENGLISH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

English in the 21st century is constructed in dynamic ways, informed by debates that acknowledge the opportunities and tensions of living in an increasingly global context. The political and economic market has changed considerably since the 20th century and so too have the demands placed on schools as an agency of government control. The neo-liberalist push toward consumerism has particularly resulted in the urgent demand for English to create citizens who are global thinking, as opposed to the morally good national citizens demarcated in early 20th century thought. Furthermore, the demands of the market have significantly influenced the identity, expectations and work of English students as current consumers and future producers.

Teachers of English in the 21st century face a challenging task of preparing students to face the operative demands of the globalised markets, whilst still providing a source of practice that promotes citizenship values. The aims underpinning English are therefore, informed by joint ideological and pragmatic needs for students to become active producers of meaning, negotiating consumer demands and corporate decision-making. Simultaneously, English has an egalitarian agenda to create informed citizens who can find a way of being together in the world. Thompson (2004) articulates a view of this ethical and egalitarian 21st century model of English:

Students are invited to start to challenge and question their world. In order to take an active role in shaping their future world they need to develop rhetorical skills; to become active producers of their own knowledge and skills… to understand themselves in relation to others… to make informed, responsible and tolerant judgements about issues of values and ethics. (p. 20)

Constructions of English, from democratic perspectives, contribute to a sense of the future, without letting the expectations of global market demands detract from a valuing of human virtues. Kress (2006b) summarises this contentious state as working “for forms of sociality
which are governed by tolerance and understanding, from communities founded on ideals of mutuality and support… so that children [will] lead confident and productive lives” (p. 32). The teaching of Literature within senior English subjects is pertinent to achieving these democratic ideals.

The debates impacting on English in the state of Victoria are embedded in powerful discourses that are shaping English elsewhere. These debates, steeped in historical, political and cultural interpretations of what English is and what it ought to become, are fraught with tension. This tension presents the profession with an opportunity to re-examine its core aims and practices, contextualising the subject against the broader theme of globalisation. Kress (2006a) depicts English as entering a state of ‘radical instability’, influenced by changing social and communication needs. Satellite, Internet and the accessibility of foreign markets and communications has produced a global culture that sets the precedent for English not to assume false commonalities. English subjects, in this sense are potentially constructed by new forms of sociality, which liberate educators to respond to the future in ways that are more productive and forward looking. Kress particularly emphasises this shifting focal point in 21st century Englishes toward designs of meaning-making and the encouragement of creative thinking and innovation (Kress, 2003). Empowering students to become designers of meaning is equated to them becoming confident participants in global environments. Embracing multimodal forms and creating opportunities for meaning-making are symbolic of attitudes toward textuality that he asserts challenge and redefine older versions in this century. This viewpoint significantly questions literary print constructions of English, suggesting individuals draw on a plethora of visual and sensorial skills to develop an understanding of what they read and hear. By relying on print literature as the primary vehicle for signifying meaning, educators potentially limit students’ experience and intellectual engagement with other forms of meaning and perspective.

Kress’ comments meaningfully connect to other voices that have shaped English debates in the first decade of the 21st century. Despite disparities and discontinuities in how English is defined, contemporary constructions emphasise the importance of egalitarian principles in a subject responding to a democratic global community. Core values of citizenship are valorised as part of the English agenda. Creating culturally literate citizens, who can identify, critique and assume their positions in social and economic communities, is a contemporary challenge quite distinct from past formations. Sawyer (2006) arguing against conservative education reforms advocates for this democratic, civilising view of English subjects. Like Kress, Sawyer valorises forms of English that are protective of democratic values, including issues of social justice, equity and a moral cautioning against rampant individualism at the expense of social cohesion. In Sawyer’s construction, the associated language and literary practices of English education are powerfully entwined with those of moral and political practices, such that its “aim ought to be
to create humane society” (Sawyer, 2006, p. 19). This humanising view of English is an historical construction that some see as renewed in the democratic rhetoric surrounding 21st century English.

Schools are fundamental to students’ identity formation and their engagement with social, cultural and economic transitions in a global democracy. Establishing an egalitarian ethos is therefore, integral to the ongoing milieu of English teaching, which aims to equip students to technologically and humanely respond to a potentially neoliberal landscape. The rhetoric associated with this egalitarian agenda embeds notions of student engagement, diversity and difference at the centre of curriculum projects. Working within what McGregor (2011) particularly argues is an egalitarian ethos, requires a radical undertaking to create schools that centre on student engagement, forsaking top-down hierarchical structures at odds with the subtext of constant change underpinning 21st century living. Globalisation, technologies and issues of identity and power inform McGregor’s view of education; that an egalitarian ethos is integral to the ongoing intellectual growth and engagement of students in contemporary schools. Based on an ethnographic study of 32 Australian high school students, McGregor concludes that students often resist ‘traditional’ approaches to education at odds with the technological and socio-cultural ‘revolutions’ shaping their lives. Traditional approaches within the school, informed by discourses of authority and obedience, are seen as counterproductive to external contexts in which students are “being socially and culturally positioned to question notions of truth” (p. 2). In contrast democratic discourses, and egalitarianism as a central tenet of these, empower students to produce their own counter-narratives. Creation, innovation and contestation of perceived universal truths are fundamental processes emanating from an egalitarian relationship. By encouraging students to contest narratives of power, English has the transformative power to openly address the issues pertinent to the social world of 21st century learners.

Democratic discourses are inherently concerned with issues of identity, representation and power. The pragmatic aims of educating students in the English classroom are conjoined with ideological aims to further the democratic goals of global culture and citizenship. Creating an intellectual and emotional space in English, that allows students to explore their identity, is part of a humanist agenda that seeks to protect students from being defined by the external pressures imposed on them. These external forces include the media, peers, socio-political institutions and popular culture. The English classroom becomes part of a social process in which students are encouraged to search for meaning and self-definition. Tinney (2002) frames this as part of a nexus in which questions about the future: our students’ identity as citizens, the type of democracy they will create, and even who holds power are matters inextricably tied to the issue of self definition. He forcefully argues for an ‘authentic’ approach to English teaching that
empathizes students to define themselves in order to democratically live the lives they choose. The power of self-actualization is depicted as critically endangered by the external forces of mass media such that individuality is potentially subverted by a new reality in which we are “wired, networked and somehow tied to a yet-to-be-imagined media construct” (p. 150). His metaphor of teachers as ‘relevant members in a good tribe’ positions the teacher at the heart of a democratic enterprise. She is part of the tribe allowing the students to negotiate their world through ‘authentic’ forms of assessment and inquiry. Teachers become the gatekeepers of the tribe’s stories: their personal histories, tales and imagined futures. Researching teachers’ perspectives and transforming their narratives elucidates how this democratic ideal is constructed.

Rethinking, or reimagining the future of English is a particularly poignant motif of 21st century academic literature. Misson (2012) alludes to the challenges of definition by borrowing from Bauman’s (2011) concept of ‘liquid modernity’ to describe the current time. Essential to Misson’s viewpoint is “a strong sense of the world being fluid and uncontained by social constraints as in the past” (p. 28). Misson posits a vision of English as a constellation, incorporating five essential elements that will enable students to contend with the instability and contingency of the modern world. In a world of constant becoming, Misson argues that English must commit itself to: critical analysis, imagination, affect, ethics and belief. Inevitably, this situates literature, alongside other practices, as part of an enterprise that enables students to critically imagine future possibilities, and their contribution to the world’s diversity:

The reception and production of texts is vital… we will do critique, but we will also be looking out for the ways in which texts open up meaning and promote attachment to the world… on understanding people and their relations with each other and the world they live in both affectively and ethically. (p. 34)

A commitment to innovation, ingenuity and diversity are philosophically embedded in democratic visions of English practice; which acknowledge the contested landscape on which English subjects are predicated. The realisation of this, however, is dependent on understanding the many ways English can, and is, discursively constructed. Green (2008) particularly notes the challenges of constructing global and democratic English subjects, when ‘English’ means something different in its varying temporal, geographical, and even individual school contexts. The problem of identifying what ‘English’ means is further compounded by the many ways in which it can be viewed and spoken of as a school subject and discipline. Contemporary Englishes, as school subjects, are informed by a plethora of fields including cultural and media studies, and linguistics and literary studies among these. Ultimately, however, by quoting Wittgenstein’s idea of a ‘family resemblance’ Green (2008) attempts to show, that at least in Australia, there are common threads on which a reconstruction of English might be wound.
Thinking of the past, present and future within the broader global frame is the fundamental hope and challenge for what Green represents as a twinned project of reinvigorating English, and the Australian nation, in light of national curriculum developments and shifting global conditions. He places rhetoric and democracy at the centre of rethinking the English project, unifying a view of how these might contribute to the pragmatic, ideological, pedagogical and relational reformations of English.

Green (2008) perceives a shift occurring in a world that has historically been primarily ‘print-centric’, with the novel and the newspaper as the textual mechanisms driving the ‘imagined community’ through which our thoughts on nationhood are founded. As a subject essentially concerned with language, and literature as part of this, rhetoric is inextricably tied to how Green perceives English as a construct. Drawing on Berlin (2003) he portrays English subjects as socially constructed through language and therefore, inevitably dealing with issues of “identity, culture and power, and with questions of becoming someone...and nationhood” (p. 38). The ways in which English might be understood is through language or discourse, which is inherently political. Rhetoric elevates the political issues central to the democratic education platform; creating sustainable societies committed to justice, and imagining the lives of individuals on whom these societies will depend. This is quite significant in light of the teachers’ preoccupation in this study with democratic values and human ingenuity. Such grand visions of social reformation and individual enlightenment are found in constructions of English that empower individuals to move from replication and deductive logic toward an intellectual flexibility (Golsby-Smith, 2013). Howie further encapsulates the potential of English to create such an environment, drawing on Frow’s assertion (2001) that:

> English is about relationships, and it's about practices of reception and creation, or the negotiation and possibilities of meaning from different socio-cultural and historical positions. (cited Howie, 2008a, p. 76)

The construction of English as a place of activity, mobilising social reform is a recurrent theme in academic literature. If English subjects are aimed at inspiring students to take part in shaping a creative, forward looking knowledge based society; stakeholders in education have to think critically about the pedagogies, policies and frames that will accompany the ideal. In order to shape practices, there needs to be a distinct understanding of what globalization really means beyond the neo-liberal competitive market, and greater clarity in how teachers are already working toward such understandings in the Australian English subjects. Singh and Han (2006) perceive education in the millennium as ideally geared toward affirmative action with the possibility to determine:

> Whether the dream of an innovative, knowledge based democracy can provide
even a petite narrative (let alone a grand one) to nurture and harness the hope, creativity and passions of all citizens. (Singh & Han, 2006, p. 43)

Singh and Han conceive globalization as a concept defined by three areas of change: the trans-national movement of people, environmental (un)sustainability, and advancing ICT demands. All three are relevant to the study, emerging as themes in teachers’ reflections. Underpinning global frames is the recognition of changing definitions of society and identity resulting from new opportunities to travel or immigrate on an unprecedented scale. Singh and Han conceptualise this trans-national movement of people as an aspect of globalisation already changing the identity of education. Advancements in communication technologies, alongside the development of multi-cultural democracies, have resulted in culturally diverse and tolerant classroom communities. However, while globalization can be seen as a culturally democratic ideal, it is simultaneously impacted by dystopian issues of eco-logical destruction and ‘multicultural (un)sustainability’. The destruction of ecology through an aggressive industrial economy, and the potential erosion of global multiculturalism through systemic poverty are issues Singh and Han see as significantly shaping the future differently to the past. They argue that the skills underpinning students’ readiness to take affirmative action are in part, the responsibility of ethical democratic subjects. This view of English as a great ethical liberator, is a prevalent theme in Australian curriculum discussions, epitomised in Holbrook’s (2013) claims:

To use English to its full extent is to attain a certain, admittedly limited, freedom from all those forces that seek to determine, control, manipulate us. English teachers are nothing less than teachers of freedom. (p. 82)

Whilst Holbrook’s claims are made in light of critical literacy, they raise a significant idea re-shaping English subjects in Australia and elsewhere. Englishes of the future must work restoratively to reconcile human relations and subjective ways of knowing in a landscape dominated by neo-liberal discourses and standards based reform. In one sense, this calls for a restorative model of English that promotes peacekeeping, empathy and self-learning at the centre of pedagogical spaces (Winn, 2013). The innovative use of new technologies is viewed as integral to this global enterprise, bringing teachers and students into relation as co-producers of knowledge. In another more evangelical undertaking, it may require a return to a quest for enlightenment.

Medway’s (2010) construction of English, influenced by Romantic discourses argues for a reimagining of English that seeks to reinforce the values underpinning Enlightenment. His vision of curriculum is contingent on understanding the pursuit of truth and knowledge, in not too dissimilar ways, to the educators of the eighteenth century who advocated for a spiritual and
moral agenda. The Romantic construction Medway envisages is one that positions English within a broader pursuit of humane culture and civilised enlightenment through conceptual development and philosophical reflection. He reasons that there are more ways of viewing knowledge, beyond traditional constructions; knowledge that conveys the subjectivity of experience that is felt, yet sometimes impossible to clearly articulate. This knowledge has a significant function in cultivating humane ideals and ethical values:

A proper respect for values to do with human relations: humanity, belief in the shared humanity of all men and women, regard for others and acknowledgement of intuition, feeling and imagination. (p. 10)

Literature has a significant place in Medway’s argument; it is through the novel that enlightened values and ways of knowing, too often overlooked, are experienced. Furthermore, it is through literature that students acquire linguistic refinement and sophisticated conceptual viewpoints. Holbrook also articulates this esteemed valuing of literature as an epitome of eloquence:

Studying writing of any order of linguistic and intellectual sophistication enables and empowers its readers. But in order for us to acquire these precious language and thinking arts we need to be exposed to models of eloquence, and we find them in the proven great writers of the past, in their language arts. (Holbrook, 2013, p. 88)

Medway’s vision is not without its critics. Eighteenth century approaches to enlightenment, despite the pursuit of moral idealism, reinforce secular views of religion, culture and beliefs, further marginalizing “more intuitive, relational and aesthetic ways of apprehending reality” (Pike, 2012, p. 251). Furthermore, Medway’s ethos raises questions about inclusivity. Rather than romanticising the idea of the ‘noble savage’, Pike (2012) suggests caution is needed. In a democratic society governed by humane values, some cultural customs are unable to be endorsed. Citing examples including infanticide and clitorectomy, Pike argues that some aesthetics, practices and beliefs are actually counter-productive and dangerous to enlightenment’s humane agenda. This necessitates a critical approach to English and literary study that might draw upon the twinned ideals of Romanticism and Enlightenment, in ways that are both affective and rational. Stevens (2011) asserts such undertakings require recognition of the contingency of knowledge and deeper engagement with the ‘language of possibility’. Furthermore, his view offers scope and hope for literary Englishes, aligning with Medway’s perspective these should address “knowledge and cognitive ability as well as emotional and aesthetic response” (Medway, 2010, p. 11).
2.4 SUMMARY

Chapter Two presented an historical review of the issues, tensions and literary developments, which frame contemporary constructions of English subjects in Victoria. The chapter began with an overview of 19th century formations of English, examining some of the attitudes and changes that shaped the subject in Victoria up until the mid-twentieth century. Of note is the movement from early formations of the subject concerned with moral instruction through to humanist developments, and a shift in how reading material and practices gradually became more literary in focus. The second part of the chapter focused on mid-twentieth century developments, contextualising developments in Victoria in light of the broader debates in the profession in the post-Dartmouth years. The final section discussed some of the literature surrounding 21st century concerns related to literature and English teaching, noting how literary constructions are embedded in global and democratic discourses. Chapter Three is intended to further contextualise the research and its findings. Chapter Three particularly examines the literary perspectives and discourses that inform a view of what constitutes literature and literary practice, exploring the significance if these in terms of English subjects.
CHAPTER THREE

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE – LITERATURE AND ENGLISH

3.0 INTRODUCTION

An historical review of academic writing on English education suggests that literature has always held a strong presence in English subjects in Victoria. To ask whether literature still matters in English seems senseless in such a context as this. However, in accepting that literature does have a place we must question what its role is and can be, if it is to embraced by English teachers in future directions. Academic literature in the first decade of the 21st century has moved considerably beyond arguments of tensions and resistance to examine how new democratic directions are shaping the English subjects, and what possibilities remain for literary study within it. Furthermore, whilst 21st century Englishes may ostensibly be moving closer to an emphasis on literacies, away from literary constructions (Peel et al., 2000), literature remains on the English agenda in Australia. Despite persistent claims of literacy crises and literary demises, English in Australia has continued to evolve, and in doing so, encompassed changing approaches to text, language, and literature.

Chapter Three explores the core themes and perspectives informing V.C.E. English and literary practice. The chapter begins with an exploration of key socio-political discourses influencing English practice, and a valuing of literature within it. Discourses related to democracy, ethics and cultural tolerance are pertinent to 21st century constructions of English. These discourses are connected to aspirations of creating young adults who are articulate, well-read and confident producers of meaning. After establishing global and democratic understandings of English, the chapter moves into an exploration of literary discourses. Literature, as an embodiment of language, ideas and semiotics, has continued to be one of the central pillars of English, renewed and reinvigorated by recent debates in Australia around the national curriculum. This section particularly focuses on discourses of passion and pleasure associated with the literary aesthetic, and their significance as part of the democratic, civilising English enterprise. A discussion of canonicity, and the relationship between literature and English teaching is advanced in the following section. From issues of canonicity, the thesis moves into a discussion of critical literary theory and its influence on how meaning is interpreted and literary inquiry is pursued in senior English. The final section focuses on what happens to literature as technology and multimodal texts flourish and challenge contemporary English practice.

3.1 LITERARY DISCOURSES: DEMOCRACY, ETHICS AND TOLERANCE

The metaphor of democracy as a ‘double edged sword’ informs Green’s (2008) view of why it is necessary to reconstruct how we think about our literary heritage and its place in an
Australian English curriculum. If democracy is foregrounded in how English is constructed, then issues of power, culture, and representation become fundamental issues infiltrating textual practice. The central element of English practice becomes that of language, with literature as text or discourse, part of the political rhetoric shaping its formation. Green, in referencing Arnold’s treatise on mid-nineteenth century culture, suggests the English subjects are historically pitted by periods of crisis in which educators inevitably lament the shifting conditions of society. Literary traditions, within privileged discourses, are treated as unproblematic and carried forth into new ages, unreconstructed and epitomised in the culture wars played out in the media and in some conservative circles of reform. Against the backdrop of the National Curriculum in Australia, which organises English according to three recurring historical strands of ‘language’, literacy’ and ‘literature’, Green reframes the literary argument (and that of literacy) as needing to focus on language, or more specifically rhetoric. Drawing on Eagleton’s (1983) challenge to the English profession in the mid 1980s Green emphasises the importance of understanding how discourses operate as part of the broader emphasis on democracy in current climes. A reconceptualised approach to rhetoric is seen as revitalising the central purpose of English, “doing things with texts, about the impact that texts have in and on the world” (Green, 2006, cited Green, 2008 p. 40). Literary studies, as discursive and dialogic engagement with textual forms and practices, are governed by a sociality or performativity of meaning-making. Green suggests this contributes an element of ‘worldliness’ to reconfigured understandings of textual work in the English curriculum. Whilst Green falls short of endorsing literature as the central tenet of the English project, he valorises literary writing as fostering creative, imaginative and aesthetic engagement. Literature, what Green terms ‘artwork’, has a significant place in textually mediating how we imagine the world at a time when it is “becoming virtualised, hyper-real, semiotic and representational” (p. 42). Working reflexively with literature, developing a ‘literary literacy’ (Green, 2006, cited Green, 2008) becomes part of the emphasis on production and meaning-making core to both writing and reading. This emphasis on production and discourse is pertinent to the study. The democratic possibilities posed by such rich imaginings underpin some teachers’ valuing of literature as a legacy and compass for producing new texts and creating new meaning.

Reid’s (2013) critique of the role of literature within a national Australian Curriculum, further elaborates on this interplay between reader, text and democratic contexts. Democratic discourses emphasise the concept of transferability; Reid argues that students’ encounter with literature should elicit understandings that transcend familiarity and “reframe experience by introducing them to worlds elsewhere… across time as well as across different places” (Reid, 2013, p. 65). Close engagement with literary texts creates reader awareness of the continuities that frame the human story, bringing to life the characters and moments that contribute to its history. Literature is the lens through which democratic reimagining is made possible.
Motivated by a curiosity about the world and people's different experiences of it, literature, particularly of past times and foreign places, positions the reader as a time traveller, negotiating story across diverse contexts. The ultimate destination of the literary travel is one Reid paraphrases from the writings of Prue Gill and Bella Illesca (2011):

> We want our students to... develop their conception of the relationship between language and ideas, to confidently express their ways of seeing, to think in increasingly abstract ways, to be open to challenge... to marvel at the way people use language to help us see anew and to experience unknown worlds in intimate ways. (cited Reid, 2013, p. 69)

Democratic contexts call for a sophisticated literacy that encourage students to be active agents as opposed to passive subjects in negotiating meaning. Holbrook (2013) argues that literature has the potential to elevate students’ consciousness of meaning and form, in a way that is compatible with principles of innovation and creativity in English. Linguistic and intellectual creativity are envisaged as cultivating the formation of ideas and understandings, and ultimately new realities. Furthermore, Holbrook suggests literature is pertinent in focusing on the concepts needed to achieve this democratic vision: tradition, authority and innovation. His conceptualisation of literature as a ‘history of radical difference’ supports a literary English agenda in which the present and future can be created anew. Underpinning his position is a perspective on literature as the texts and ideas bequeathed by one generation to another. As opposed to a body of writing to be revered, it is open to the scope of human reflection and emotion, from pleasure to criticism, and celebration to argument. In Holbrook’s vision, literature can be viewed as simultaneously the source of tradition and a construct of innovation. New contributors are both the inheritors of literary tradition and the radical innovators breaking away from these voices. This complex interaction is evident in his claims that:

> In order to bring genuine newness into the world, we must introduce our students to the tradition, which is itself history of unfolding innovation; and we must grasp that this tradition of great writing and great art has real authority for us – as a record of novelty. (p. 83)

Finding ways into literature that foster a democratic and a culturally tolerant ethos requires a reimagining of literary study. Tinney’s vision of English for the democratic tribe (Tinney, 2002) potentially offers reconciliation between past traditions and new directions. Dispensing with literary analysis, Tinney emphasises the importance of student production of meaning, particularly through writing. Underpinning her view is a criticism of literary analysis as an intellectual pursuit that is potentially counter-effective in the lives of high school students. Tinney suggests that becoming proficient literary critics is not essential to adolescents’ genuine
engagement with literature through democratic practices of self-discovery. Exploring, arguing and writing about literary works empowers students to find personal meaning and significance in other stories as a way of understanding, constructing and telling their own. This transformative power, however, is not limited to analytical modes of response. Through creative composition and peer collaboration, students are provided with authentic experiences of meaning-making that also enrich their critical reception skills (Fitzgerald, Smith & Monk, 2012). Furthermore, through more radical undertakings of performativity and collaboration, alternative readings of the same texts are made possible.

Teachers work with literary perspective in dynamic and interactive ways. Edminston and McKibben (2011) particularly elucidate how democratic understandings can be elicited through the power of dramatic response. Dramatic storytelling, in similar ways to other creative compositions, encourages students to engage in literacy and social practices that allow them to articulate and embrace “the struggle to accommodate conflicting viewpoints” (p. 99). By forging connections with the lives, relationships and circumstances storied in literary works, students experiment with philosophical ideas that counter, what they suggest is, a cultural impoverishment imposed by the yoke of mass media consumption. Faulkner and Latham (2013) also emphasise the power of literary study to philosophically deal with unsettling issues of marginalisation, portraying the contemporary English teacher as a harbinger of ethical values. The ethical role of the English teacher is a concept evident in Tinney’s (2002) assertion that English teachers should counteract the media’s negative message about self worth as consumption. Tinney (2002) further argues that the relevant message English teachers need to impart for a democratic age is one that asserts “your value is determined by your contributions” (p. 150). The teacher as the ‘good elder’ is the wise and patient figure that both exposes the ‘tribe’ to the stories of their cultural communities and assists them in turn to become the contributors and the storytellers.

The intimate connection between community and reading is one McLean Davies et al. (2013) perceive as fostering ‘literary sociability’. Libraries, schools, book clubs, writers festivals and online books are examples of communities, drawing readers together in relation to each other, the texts and their experience of the world. Drawing on Rubin (2012) she depicts readers as actors within these networks of social practice, performing readings of the text and creating forms of community and identity. Literary sociability is a dynamic concept; it allows the focus of literature to be socially negotiated and mediated, highlighting how literary reading intervenes in social relationships. Furthermore, it acknowledges “the kinds of communal identities that are formed by practices of writing and reading” (Kirkpatrick and Dixon, 2012, p. v, cited McLean Davies et. al., 2013, p. 229). Reading and writing are interwoven in this vision of community, encouraging readers to synthesise connections in the literature with their own experiences and
others realities. Indeed, in response to the Australian Curriculum design McLean Davies and Kent (2011) indeed suggest that a view of literary study as an “active, creative, and playful enterprise” (p. 111) will make it genuinely possible for students and teachers to collaborate in reading and creating literature.

3.2 LITERARY DISCOURSES: PLEASURE, PASSION AND CRITICAL AESTHETICS

Many English teachers, who identify as lifelong readers, articulate a passionate yearning for the aesthetic and a love of literature, which influences their view of English. Exploring the aesthetic: its intensity and beauty is connected to images of literature as pleasurable and memorable, as well as humanising and hopeful. Sumara’s (2002) literary insight particularly reinforces a view of this relationship between reader and text, as an intimate experience of growth, pleasure and realisation. Underpinning Sumara’s viewpoint is a valuing of the literary canon as an artistic representation of ideas and language. Similar to Sawyer’s (2013) interpretation of Boomer’s work, literature is depicted as a representation of ideas, and an artefact of knowledge, language and aesthetics. This belief in literature’s superior ability to elicit a human response, and attune the world to literary sensitivities, is part of its appeal to English teachers. Sumara poignantly argues literature should occupy a central position in the English curriculum, as encountering this aesthetic conjures the imagination of the reader, provoking deeper realisations of the world. Imagination and realisation are concepts seen to emanate from having the ability to think beyond one’s experiences in order to embrace a culture of understanding. Sumara’s writings, embedded in Romantic discourses, allude to the beauty of the aesthetic in capturing a child’s imagination. The meaningfulness of reading resides in opening the reader’s mind to self-understanding, relationships and new experiences of the world. As a passionate proponent of literature, Sumara’s reflections frame literary English as a spiritual and pleasurable encounter with the aesthetic. This transformative appeal of literature is also evident in the earlier thoughts of Dewey (1934) who argued:

Art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association. This force of art, common to all arts, is most fully manifested in literature. (cited in Stevens, 2011 p. 465)

Literary arguments emphasise how young readers gradually encounter new ideas about lived experiences through the aesthetic qualities they intellectually and emotionally engage with as readers. This relationship, encompassing a critical and aesthetic appreciation of literature, is integral to helping young readers imagine new realities. Sawyer’s (2013) analysis of Garth Boomer’s contributions to the formation of English subjects, further elucidates literature’s cultural and relational value. In teachers’ reflections, Romantic and Enlightenment discourses
are interwoven with cultural ideals, illuminating a view of literature as the epitome of aesthetics, morality, sociality and meaning. Creating a literary culture focused around the art of creative response and conversation is depicted as an ideal that teachers should work towards:

Teach the art of conversation so that readers who leave … for the wider world will have learnt how to seek out and engage with new voices. (Boomer 1974/2010, cited, Sawyer, 2013, p. 37)

Literary conversations, that acknowledge literature’s social and critical role in intervening in human relations, and the possibility to work with perspective, is particularly valorised in this view. Sumara further endorses the capacity to work with a critical imagining of the author’s aesthetic, arguing it can enrich a young person’s understanding without detracting from the their intense experience of engagement or pleasure. For Sumara, literature matters because the aesthetic carries meaning; in valuing literature an individual explores a sense of who they are and in encountering the eloquence of the canon, they are able to articulate their own understanding of the world with others. His view of literature is strongly embedded in post-structuralist thought, emphasising the inter-connectedness of personal and social identity to literary engagement. Literature influences how an individual creates new meaning and possibilities for living in the world:

Literary engagements and the practices of interpretation that are conditioned by those engagements… expand their [readers’] imagined world of possibilities. (Sumara, 2002, p. xiii).

Whilst literature engages students in acts of critical and social imagining, democratic perspectives emphasise the importance of ensuring literature is appropriated and contextualised as opposed to unquestionably revered (Hateley, 2013). A literary focus, committed to the pursuit of truth and pleasure, must also be governed by a wider recognition of the processes through which some texts become regarded as part of the elevated art of the canon while others are relegated to lesser forms. Furthermore, it invites questioning of how canonicity is discussed and embedded in curriculum designs against other textual forms. Whilst Sumara supports the historical desirability of the canon at the centre of literary study, he is also respectful of student and teacher autonomy. Sumara highlights the role of individual choice and teacher influence as processes that are redefining literature to being any text, which is aesthetically pleasing and engaging for the reader. While discourses of pleasure and passion are traditionally associated with literary art, autonomous viewpoints suggest any experience of reading that relies on the aesthetic, has the potential to induce intense feeling and empathy. The aesthetic is more than an esoteric beauty that gratifies a human need for pleasure and fulfilment; it is also a feeling of intensity that positions readers to connect to literature in deeply humane ways.
Whilst Sumara’s discussion focuses on traditional literary culture, Beavis (2013) suggests this intense experience of pleasure and passion can also be found in digital texts. She imagines an English curriculum in which:

Aesthetic texts in multiple forms are part of children’s narrative, viewing and reading worlds, where pleasure, the personal, the aesthetic and the creative are central elements of textual experiences in and out of school. (p. 250)

Reader engagement necessitates moving beyond limited debates about canonical literature’s elevation of the human soul and transformative joy in the aesthetic. Historically the canon has always been disputed and continually evolved to encompass new traditions. The challenge of the 21st century is to consider what other texts, by merit of their aesthetics and thought, might evoke the same intensity as past canonical works. Historical depictions of the canon as the development of our ‘modernist consciousness’ should not be used to justify it as a sole representation of what pleasurable modes of literary study includes. Roche (2004) articulates this idea in his depiction of the integral aesthetic attributes that contribute to literary engagement and merit. Twenty-first century literatures, he argues, should provide meaningful lenses for viewing the human condition; aesthetically appeal to the readers’ sense of naïve joy or emotion; and also address socio-cultural inequalities of representation, which inherently is what the canon had sought to do, though in a post-modernist light, did not always achieve.

The technological world is overwhelming dense with information comprised of facts, figures, and rational statistics. Literature as an aesthetic art form is valued as bringing a sense of balance to how individuals critically and creatively encounter the world. The power of the aesthetic acts as a reminder of the reader’s humanity:

It is one of the greatest pleasures and responsibilities of being an English teacher that we work, critically and creatively, with the aesthetic and its rich sense of human possibility. (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 226)

Inherent in Misson and Morgan’s view of the aesthetic is a need to consider the relationship of the text to the society it connects with, and the response it effects in the individual reader. The aesthetic is intimately connected with constructions of identity, often revealing insights into cultural themes, symbols and motifs. A critical literacy approach, as opposed to devaluing aesthetic wonder, encourages readers to critically and creatively respond to the culture and context of production. Misson and Morgan see the aesthetic as situated in the structure, form, symbols and language of the texts in ways that position the reader to emotionally engage with the characters and actions. Utilising a post-structuralist framework, they argue that appreciation of the aesthetic in 21st century English subjects, involves engaging in critical dialogue about
how literary forms represent the possibilities of human experience and understanding. Critical literacy enables the aesthetic to be conceived beyond beauty to encompass a representation of human identity. Literature is valued for enhancing a reader’s ability to imagine the world, a viewpoint similar to that mentioned by many of the teachers in this study. Critical literacy, by opening readers to the expanses of human emotion, ingenuity and creativity imbued in literary texts, Misson and Morgan argue, deepens their aesthetic appreciation and engagement.

### 3.3 PERSPECTIVES: CANONS AND OTHER LITERATURES

Constructions of literary English have always been concerned with issues of canonicity. Subjective divides between canonical literature and lesser texts, ‘Englishness’ versus other cultural forms, and the centrality of canons, are part of ongoing contestations in English. Sawyer (2013) suggests the central debate in English actually remains the overarching question of whether literature is the epicentre of English, and if it is not, what will survive or grow in its wake. The literary canon, as much as English itself, has often been a site of contestation, in which canonicity is created alongside issues of authority and power. From religious authorisation to academic legitimisation, the formation of the canon has represented universal human themes across cultures and history. The subjective nature of the canon makes it particularly difficult to define. However, some notion of what a canon is was instrumental to asking questions about, and reflecting on teachers’ attitudes toward literature. When used in this thesis the term loosely refers to a body of work perceived as possessing some kind of cultural capital and social relevance. Mainly it is used to refer to British literature written over the last thousand years, which has stood the test of time. However, at times it is also used (in a rather limited Anglo-centric way) to refer to a collection of Australian literature, written in the last two hundred years. This latter version was adopted in response to the teachers’ perceptions of what an Australian literary canon might include. In choosing to ask questions about canon, there is a need to work with fluid definitions that take into account its subjective and arbitrary nature. The canon, as much as one can be defined, “has undergone constant change because the conditions of production (publication) and reception (criticism and readership) are always changing” (Morrison & Parker, 2006, p. 5).

The concept of the canon as albeit a subjective, collection of writings has had a significant role in shaping social, cultural and political norms, and therefore, its identity or composition is often a source of tension. The composition of the canon is something that is consciously and unconsciously constructed within religious, academic, artistic and popular domains, contributing to and reshaping society as a form of cultural memory. Furthermore, as art and aesthetic, the canon embodies the language and signifiers of culture, indicated by the “inter-textual citations and linguistic devices, visual imagery and symbolic codes, and popular myths and traditionally, allegories” (Kolbas, 2001, cited Hateley, 2013, p. 72). Inevitably, as an
ideological embodiment of dominant sociological values and perspectives, the canon privileges some voices and genres over others, with regard to issues of class, gender, ethnicity and religious identity. This then requires a commitment from those who dispute this privileging to critique the canon and quarrel with its traditions, despite the temptation to become lost in its transformative aesthetics.

The power of literature resides not between the covers, but rather in the practices associated with it. Holbrook (2013) forewarns against treating the literary canon as an “oppressive grey monolith or monument” (p. 83), which detracts from its fluid and dynamic nature, and capacity to inspire innovation. Instead he argues for a valuing of its inherent diversity, as a treasury of original human thought and perspective. In comparing the writings of two poets: Gunn and Jonson, he elucidates the way in which juxtaposing two writers of different generations creates a sense of cacophony. There is a literary tension that exists between writers, attracting each to the other in a state defined as somewhere between “law and lawlessness, order and energy, rule and anarchy” (p. 85). A literary agenda in English, founded upon language and literature, therefore, becomes one of radical reimagining. An overarching sense of idealism permeates Holbrook’s depiction of canonical literature as a source of intellectual fulfilment and a catalyst of diversity. His viewpoint rests on overt claims for a transformative aesthetic, characterised by the eloquence of literary ‘masters’, whose work epitomises the language arts and is borne of a rich tradition of storytelling. The possibility for canons to create a culture of innovation through storytelling and eloquence is embodied in his claims:

> We learn to express ourselves by studying the ways in which others have expressed themselves, by acquiring, through training, their art – and then, if we can, surpassing it. (p. 87)

Engaging students’ critical appreciation of canonical literature is a principle foundation of literary inquiry. The integrity of this inquiry relies, however, on abandoning fabled misconceptions of a timeless canon, which would otherwise disguise the undercurrents that resonate in English discourses. Whilst some classical genres and ‘masters’ are privileged, others are silenced, diminished and marginalised. English teachers must negotiate the troubled waters of this divide. There is little perceived controversy, for example, surrounding Shakespeare. Born the son of a tradesman, Shakespeare rose to favour with the literati and later educators, evident in the introduction of his texts into 19th century studies of ‘English Literature’. An unproblematic view of Shakespeare’s appropriation into formalised literary study, however, is not without its detractors. Murphy (2008) argues, for example, that the treatment of Shakespeare’s works in literary study has created working class alienation to his work and some of the ideas it was meant to represent. The teaching of canon is always ideological; this is true even of its earliest formations. Trent’s (1893) nineteenth century treatise on literature highlights
the prestige attached to canons as an encapsulation of society’s knowledge, values and aesthetic heritage:

It is hardly possible that any fairly educated men can despise the advantages of a literary training or desire that his children to grow up into what we may denominate bookless men… this to us has always been one of the sorriest delusions that ever took possession of the human brain. (p. 260)

The distinction between 19th and 21st century perspectives on the literary canon is most notable in the shift away from humanism toward critical treatment of literary discourses, themes and metaphors. Literature can be seen both as the aesthetic mirror of society or as a counterpoint to its dominant ideologies, which 21st century Englishes explore and question through approaches to literary and text based study.

The teaching of classical poetry is a particular source of contention in modern constructions of English, which have significantly shifted away from practices of recitation to criticism and response. Weaven and Clark (2013) suggest the cause of poetry’s supposed decline resides in teachers’ fears of their own and their students’ unfamiliarity with aesthetic form. Encouraging students’ critical interpretation of literature, and scaffolding opportunities for creativity and pleasure, is partially dependent on the teachers’ skills in mentorship. Gordon (2012) argues this further, suggesting that education programs must foster pre-service teachers’ familiarity with the macrocosmic and microcosmic elements of literature – reading, reader and text. Developing teachers’ knowledge of theoretical perspectives and approaches to canonical genres is particularly important in multicultural classrooms. The canon calls for a sensitivity on the part of the teacher to work conscientiously and ethically to avoid imposing readings of text that further disempower those who are already marginalised. Shah (2013) elucidates this point in her recount of teaching colonial classics in a multi-ethnic classroom. In Shah’s view the teaching of canon needs to empower students to subjugate the discourses of high imperialism that colonial texts inscribe, by equipping them to “inscribe their identities upon the texts they read” (p. 202).

This study cannot escape an interest in the relationship between text, culture, identity and English education.

These implicit connections between literature and culture significantly inform literary study in Australian English subjects, and the teachers’ perceptions of what is an ‘authentic’ experience in a global age. Students’ engagement with literature needs to broaden the connections they make as readers between the world within the text and the external world it encapsulates. For literary study to be authentic, it is therefore, important that student voices, experiences and developing understandings of the world are represented in the breadth of literature they encounter. Goodwyn (2012) suggests this kind of cultural inclusivity is important to the
profession:

English teachers want all kinds of literature, from many cultures, to be significant to students and their developing lives. In this sense they want literature to have authentic status in schools as something that really matters to them and their students. (p. 225)

Debates about culture and literature are notable in Australian discussions. Whilst the issue of an Australian canon – whether one does exists, and what it includes – is debatable, definitions of literature have widened beyond Anglo-centric representations of established Australian writers, and narrow definitions of national identity. Contemporary constructions of literary English draw upon a breadth of cultural understandings, including an emphasis on Asia-pacific texts and indigenous stories, which is clearly evident in the Australian Curriculum in Years Prep to Ten. McLean Davies (2008) suggests the trend toward more culturally inclusive writings in secondary English text lists reflects a broader definition of Australian literature. Australian literature represents a plethora of voices: classic and modern, multi-ethnic and indigenous Australians. This concept is evident in Jose’s (2011) depiction of Australian literature’s plural and dialogic nature understood as:

A connective body of material, an entity that moves beyond the individual to a community of writers and readers linked through history and geography, if not always common cause… a set of relationships. (p. 104)

Whilst traditional Anglo-centric definitions of the Australian literature are potentially divisive, silencing Aboriginal and migrant voices, a more inclusive view encourages new possibilities for cultural tolerance and understanding. This is particularly true in relation to Indigenous relations, and the egalitarian agenda underpinning designs of the Australian curriculum. Healy-Ingram (2011) notes the importance of examining Indigenous literatures in critical ways that are not inhibited by Eurocentric constructions, which are unable to aesthetically explain the symbolic cultural and spiritual experiences narrated. This critical appreciation of stories as a lived experience of culture extends to postcolonial and contemporary Australian literatures. Storytelling is a formative aspect of identity formation, one Misson (1998) argues, “comes to constitute our being, give us a sense of the person we are, or at least the person we would like to be” (p. 105). Working with Australian texts, those immediately connected to heritage, indigenous and migrant experiences, is essential in fostering young people’s engagement with their own stories and those of other cultures. McLean Davies (2008) argues in favour of textual diversity, setting the critical study of Australian literature alongside other texts from other cultures. Utilising a critical frame is portrayed as integral to this endeavour:
Drawing attention to the ways literature can reflect, negotiate and contest the practices and beliefs of a society; arguably, these connections between fiction, politics and history, are vital for students to interrogate and explore as they become both readers and writers of Australian literature. (McLean Davies, 2009, p. 13).

Establishing a culture of questioning and discussion that considers anew “the reading community that will be created though the collection of texts” (McLean Davies, 2012, p. 16) is dependent on critical engagement with textual processes. This is particularly true in relation to canonicity and the relationship this has to Young Adult Literature. Canonical literature and other literary forms are traditionally set apart from Young Adult Literature. However, contemporary English subjects by including a broader range of texts, are potentially creating new spaces to work with established canons and examine other literature. Hateley (2013) asserts the potential to work with Young Adult literature, recognising how it can engage students in meaningful conversations about canonicity and the social hierarchies canons legitimise. Underpinning her view is a perception of youth literature as a unique tool composed by adults for adolescents, in order to acculturate them into the normative behaviours and ideologies validated in society. The deep questioning young adult literature invites can be utilised as a way into reading canonical works, or as a means of critiquing the processes of their production and reception. Alternatively, youth literature can be examined in light of its own complex aesthetics, generational and universal themes. Kaplan (2005) articulates the integrity critical conversations around young adult literature presuppose:

Students are sophisticated enough to look at a novel as an object in a given time and place, filled with all settings and vagaries of the particular time frame in which the novel occurs… In today’s contemporary world of ever changing dynamics and global constructs, of technological marvels and instantaneous gratification, and of changing lifestyles and alternative worldviews, perhaps, it is time that the young adult novel be analysed in a new light. Perhaps, young people can see art for what it is—a reflection of the times in which we live (Kaplan, 2005, p. 18).

In similar ways to canonical texts, young adult genres are fluid and innovative, responding and creating anew the themes pertinent to a generation of young readers. A world of modern biotechnology, represented in youth science fiction for example, is at once ethically relevant to students’ lives, yet open to imaginative possibilities as abstract fantasy (Ostry, 2004). By utilising the literature intended for young adults and opening these to similar critical readings, English teachers can “signal a desire to resist classificatory systems…and involve students in a conversation about canonicity” (Hateley, 2013, p. 77).
3.4 PERPECTIVES: LITERARY THEORY IN ENGLISH

The identity of Literature in English has altered over the last century in response to shifting ideologies underpinning educational objectives. Amidst the continual (re)generation of curriculum demands in the English subjects in Australia and elsewhere, literary theories have informed approaches and perspectives toward classic and modern literature. Ray Misson (1998) describes literary theories as the element of commonality in English practice, which provides readers with diverse theoretical frames for interpreting meanings and imagining human experience. Appleman (2009) describes them as the lenses of literary practice that unite considerations of discourse, aesthetics and theme, giving the reader the power to respond to the world-view the text consciously or subconsciously creates. They invite the reader to play with readings and to discover the unexpected. For theorists and critics such as Wolfgang Iser the act of reading and searching for meaning in literary texts cannot be separated from a view of the reader’s role. Reader-Response theory was particularly influential in shifting the focus away from truth finding to meaning-making. Publishing The Act of Reading in 1975, Iser advocated the futility of using literature as a means for reaching an absolute truth, given language and concepts “do not have meaning in themselves, but are constructed to convey meaning” (Misson, 2004, p. 97). Since the end of humanism and the birth of critical literary theory, this emphasis on using theoretical lenses to interpret literature, has significantly shaped literary study in English. However, it is important to note in the formative Dartmouth years, focusing on literature as an interpretive encounter with lived ideas dominated over other critical frames:

Response is a word that reminds the teacher that the experience of art is a thing of our making, an activity in which we are our own interpretive artist… it is literature not literary criticism, which is the subject. (Dixon, 1967 cited Dixon 2009, p. 248)

Whilst theories represent distinct ontological considerations pertinent to society at different times, collectively these continue to inform contemporary constructions of literary study. This is certainly the case with Iser and Rosenblatt’s depiction of reader interpretation. Iser and Rosenblatt developed Reader-Response theory, a theory that privileged individual readings of literature and the readers’ role in the construction of meanings. Reader-Response theory, along similar lines to the early post-structuralist thinkers, placed significant emphasis on the power of the individuals’ own intellectual and creative faculties, especially imagination, to determine the significance of the text and the view of human experience offered (Johnston, 2003). The rationale behind Iser and Rosenblatt’s reflections was a belief that readers bring to the text their prior knowledge of life experiences and language practices, which enable them to construct from the aesthetic and its representational world, diverse authentic meanings. The centrality of the reader as meaning-maker reflected the development of literary constructions of English
away from the idea of the monolithic text enshrining an absolute truth. Texts were re-envisioned as socially embedded constructions of language and ideology as Reader-Response theory flourished in Australian English subjects. Theoretically Reader-Response remains present in the common practices through which teachers encourage students to develop their own interpretation and recreation of texts in some form of critical or creative response (Goodwyn 2012; Watson, 2004).

Whilst Reader-Response has remained a popular frame for encouraging students to engage with literature, it is important to recognise the criticism it has received for de-centralising the significance of the author as the source of meaning. Some theorists construe language as the source of social meaning; both the author and the reader are positioned as social subjects in relation to the text. Belsey explains the nature by which individuals are socially positioned as subjects, through the ideological and grammatical nature of language:

As a free subject, I plan my life (within certain obvious constraints), affirm my values, choose my friends (if they’ll have me) and give an account of myself (I)… But I do so on condition that I invoke (subject myself to) the terms, meanings, categories that I and others recognise, the signifiers we have learned in the process of learning our native language. (Belsey, 2002, p. 52)

In Reader-Response theory literature is transformed outside the authors’ control and “the context in which it was received” (Johnston, 2003, p. 50). Theorists such as Roland Barthes see no legitimate reasoning for examining the authors’ intended meaning, given the sociality of language. Barthes (1977) in his essay ‘The Death of the author’ argues the presence of the author in the text constrains the reader. She is denied the liberty to develop meaning from the text. Furthermore, Barthes passionately asserts that the only way for a reader to engage in meaning is to ultimately imagine the death of the author. Whilst teachers’ assertions in this study do not entirely concur with Barthes’ extreme views, some suggest it is the reader’s interpretation, above the author’s intentions, that is most significant. Some reinforce views of language more reminiscent of post-structuralist understandings, associated with Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, which incessantly question “every centrism…of all origins and ends, meaning and intention, paradigm or system” (Bennet and Royle, 2009, p. 326). Poststructuralism, in modern times, has been fundamental to literary models in English subjects, framing understandings of language, meaning and power. Although poststructuralism is a broad field to conceptualise, Ray Misson (2004) divides it into two areas of thought, useful to this present study. The first area of poststructuralism focuses on the relationship between literary text and language, which is reminiscent of Reader-Response theory, although significantly different. The second area of poststructuralism takes the relationship between human identity, language and ideology as its focal point, as embodied in many versions of critical literacy.
This study cannot escape a critical view of language. Collectively teachers’ reflections illuminated a view of language that is discursively linked to ideology and human identity. According to Misson (2004) language contributes to meaning, not only because it represents knowledge, but more importantly because it represents the possibilities and limitations of thought. The focal point of poststructuralism from this perspective is on processes of deconstruction. Deconstruction critically examines the inter-connectedness of human beings to the world and to practices of making and producing meaning. Proponents see the democratic potential in approaching literature through language: an unstable sign system, constructed around hierarchical binary oppositions, which critical analysis can disrupt. In contemporary English subjects, driven by egalitarian agendas, there is the capacity to examine the discourses in literature, and the views and values embedded in these. Belsey (2002) asserts the importance of exploring ideological discourses in texts, which significantly impacts on the readers’ ability to re-produce and create new meanings. Acknowledging meaning to be an account of how human beings are ideologically represented through language, transforms meaning from being referential to the text to differential. Furthermore, acknowledging the ideological nature of language in the relationship between text, reader and world disrupts the perceived naturalness of meaning and makes ideological discourses apparent. If language is an arbitrary and relative construct, then truth is constructed; which creates space for literary study to explore alternative viewpoints.

The critical emphasis on deconstructing language and power has manifested in the Australian English subjects as Critical Literacy. According to Foucault’s view of discourse, all relations of language are relations of power.

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it… We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart. (Foucault 1998, pp. 100-1)

This has implications for how literature is positioned in V.C.E. English, given ideological statements about democratic citizenship are embedded in the Study Design. Discourses shape the ways we are positioned in relation to social subjects and how individuals align themselves with institutions. Discourses are therefore, powerful signifiers of the self, where the self is socially constructed. Misson (2004) notes the discourses we create about ourselves are subjective constructs, which are imbued with relations of power we need to be critically literate in understanding. Critical literacy draws on post-structuralist frameworks that enable the
meaning of the text to be disrupted so students can see how language intervenes in the relationship of human beings to the world. This idea is evident in Glazier’s (2007) assertion:

Critical literacy essentially asks one first to understand how it is that texts perpetuate systems of oppression and suppression and then moves on to identify ways of disrupting the status quo. (p. 377)

Critical literacy, as earlier suggested, is represented in English through processes of analytical and aesthetic deconstruction. Literature is therefore, examined within a broad social justice framework, which attempts to address the inequalities between human beings in society. Resonant in its theoretical basis is Foucault’s recognition that in order for power to exist, there must also be the power to resist its direction. Whilst there are different definitions of critical literacy, it is Morgan’s construction that is useful for framing teachers’ reflections in this study. Morgan (2004) describes four fundamental understandings of language and power in society, which she argues critical literacy, as a modern literary framework, uses to critique discourses of inequality. These understandings pervade the narratives of literary practice presented by the teachers in this study. The first point she raises is that critical literacy in the classroom needs to disrupt the status quo. Social groups maintain power as seemingly natural through discourses that are invested within narrow understandings of the reality of human culture and diversity. Discourses of religion, power, race and politics are represented in literature in ways the reader unwittingly internalises. This is consistent with Belsey’s (2002) point that we create relationships we imagine we have with the world, instead of the real conditions of our existence.

Secondly, Morgan reminds us that literature, as with all texts, represent choices an author has made about language and meaning. Language is not neutral; the conventions a writer/speaker chooses are constructed within an understanding of the normative rules of the culture or sub-culture it represents. The language used not only represents social subjects in particular ways, it also has the power to alienate other cultures from its representation. Thirdly, it is human nature to ‘fill in the gaps’ of the silences in texts, without reflecting on how this too is an ideological act of representation. Critical literacy provides an avenue for exploring discourses in texts and in doing so it asks the reader to question how they critically encounter the world of texts. Eaglestone and English (2013) describe this transformative effect of literary theory as providing “students with a form of power [that] prevents them from feeling somehow disenfranchised” (p. 31).

The final point Morgan raises in favour of critical literacy is the realisation that readings produce meaning and therefore, have the potential to create new meanings. The strength of such a claim is worth considering, given recent media debacles regarding the nature and value of critical literacy. Howie (2006) advances an argument in favour of critical literacy as one of
the frames most central to Australian English subjects. Critical literacy has been intensely
criticised in the media amidst relativist claims that its theoretical basis devalues canonical
traditions and literary appreciation through a rudimentary reduction of literature to a mere tool
for observing relations of power. This contentious attitude is an interesting one for educators of
V.C.E. English; a year of study focused on text analysis. The voice of teachers in this study
suggest that such relativist claims are perhaps not warranted given the emphasis of text study is
often on developing students’ critical and social imagination. Working with literary theory
presupposes it has the power to stimulate students’ intellectual curiosity about texts and the
worlds outside their covers. Furthermore, it assumes that in understanding theory, students
develop their independence and identities as critical and reflexive readers (Eaglestone &
English, 2013). It is the power of the imagination that transforms students’ ability to understand
the injustices in texts and the power of their silences, creating democratic citizens who, through
literature, understand the ramifications of a competitive global industry.

3.5 LITERATURE, TECHNOLOGY AND MULTIMODALITY

Reflections on the demise of literature at the expense of technologies and multimodality are part
of an ongoing international discourse about what English is and what it should do (Bassnett,
2005). Academic literature, however, looks beyond these simplistic constructions, considering
how literature is represented in current English practice, both in accommodating new
technologies and in occupying its own space. New technologies, in the form of hand-held
devices, mean young people are in constant communication and contact with the globe, literally
at the ‘touch of a finger’. English is preparing these students for a future in which they have
already become consumers, but more importantly, will need to become active producers within.
There is an ethical imperative for English, as a subject constructed around texts and ideas, to
promote opportunities for students to be critical producers of meaning. Beavis (2013) suggests
that a literary multimodal culture provides these opportunities for students to become experts in
‘production’ and ‘reception’. Writing in response to the Australian Curriculum’s broader
conceptualisation of ‘Literature’, she envisages an English curriculum in which:

    Working with literary texts creates opportunities for imagination, production,
creativity and play, and for exploring alternate structures, elements and
conventions that organise and come to the fore in different modes. (p. 244)

In an inclusive literary culture students become critically reflexive readers, who can utilise
understandings of narrative conventions and text production. Rather than disappearing or being
reduced to a futile academic endeavour, literary concepts are widened to consider how
experience is storied, narratives are constructed, and how readers are positioned (Beavis, 2013).
According to Goodwyn (2000), if we begin thinking about print literature as its own kind of
technology, then these avenues of approach become more apparent. Print literature is constructed in specific ways; it involves communication of ideas between a writer and a reader, and encourages readers to think about the world in terms of its universal themes and metaphors. Literature, in particular, constructs stories around symbolic and semiotic signs, similar to the operative ways multimodal texts work with signs and images in digital environments. In this sense, multimodal texts and ICT can open up more possibilities in the literature studied. ICT relies on image, sound and words to communicate ideas, which if incorporated into literary practices can potentially lead to more creative dialogue (Kress, 2006a; Zancanella, Hall & Price, 2000).

Parr’s (2001) examination of literary hypertext argues this point further, highlighting the exciting possibilities for reinvigorating print literature, if teachers are prepared to virtually interact with the text. Citing three examples of literary hypertext: ‘Five Bells’ by Kenneth Slessor, ‘Maestro: an interactive guide’, and ‘The White Mandala: the life and works of Patrick White’, Parr asserts that hypertext stimulates reader engagement and reflection. His description of the hypertext traveller is a democratic image, in which teachers and students interact with the text, making decisions about starting points, areas of further exploration and annotation. The world of print literature is transformed from the static image of the page, to an interactive hyperspace in which narratives can be broken down into meta-narratives and commentaries explored at the click of a button. Navigating this virtual environment encourages readers to consider what the act of reading involves, simultaneously prompting their greater reflection on how texts are produced:

Being aware of the ways in which texts are unstable means readers keeping open their eyes and their minds to the ways that language itself can be unstable, and the ways meaning can shift substantially according to changes in contexts. (Parr, 2001, p. 240)

Whilst this virtual environment opens a realm of possibilities for re-imagining print literature, Parr also warns of the tensions teachers and students might experience in their travels. Working with literary hypertext, in similar ways to other online forms, is reliant on teachers’ openness to reading in new ways. Reading can no longer be thought of as a cognitive processing of print text, in which illustrative elements are reduced to affective embellishments (Unsworth, 2010). Reading is an interpretive act, whether the reader is engaging with the print or screen. However, when reading is adapted to screen, the aesthetics and potentially the discursive structure of the narrative is disrupted. Parr (2001) describes the ‘alienation’ of hypertext; reading virtual deconstructions creates a distance between the reader and the text. Whilst Parr perceives this alienation as critically enriching students’ textual understanding, he also acknowledges this is potentially at the expense of reader immersion. Reading the print version of the literature,
traditionally encourages immersion with the aesthetic, in which the reader becomes ‘lost’ to the narrative (Goodwyn, 2013b).

Multimodality raises important questions about how teachers conceive narrative aesthetics, and incorporate these into classroom practices. This can naturally cause a sense of conflict for the teacher of literature who identifies as an ardent reader. Goodwyn (2013a) elucidates this conflict, drawing on surveys with practising teachers in England, who juxtaposed their ‘love’ of print literature with the promise of e-texts in their students’ lives. His research reinforces the image of the literature teacher, as someone intimately bound to the materiality of printed literature; “teachers love... books... with a physical passion” (p. 12). His research likewise, highlights the increasing validation of multimodal forms by teachers who foresee their potential in fostering students’ engagement with imaginative form. Whilst a book is a material object, reading itself is a cognitive and affective experience. Although e-books are primarily an adaptation of print to screen, hypertext and other online literatures are fluid and dynamic representations of meaning, irrevocably redefining the ways teachers think about reading as simultaneously an act of immersion and reflection. These flexible views on reading are subsequently transforming how teachers and students collaborate on print and digital projects.

New technologies represent more than a shift in modality and medium; they represent new possibilities for meaning and text production (Unsworth, 2008). When students understand the creative modes of literary scholarship, and the interactive potential of modal forms, genuine possibility exists to publish online for real audiences (Moon, 2001). Goodwyn (2000) depicts the teacher who embraces this new world as a Ulysses figure, determined to be a “bringer of good things tempted perhaps by the safe harbour of literature but for whom a newer world offers new possibilities” (p. 4). However, in order to conceptualise online literature, against the formation of other texts, students need to understand the social and ideological contexts of their production (Parr, 2001). An approach to critical literacy, that acknowledges the affective and interpretive nature of reading, has the potential to open readers’ awareness to issues of aesthetic, meaning and form. Online literature is transformed by the guiding questions teachers bring to it, and the opportunities students are given to move from ‘viewing’ to active reading, as evident below:

If we want users of online literature resources to read more slowly, to savour the sounds of poetry, to feel the words in their mouth, to consider multiple layers of meanings, to attend to the echoes of other writers in the texts, then we must mediate our use of online materials. (Ruzich, 2012, p. 204)

In similar ways to online literature, other multimodal texts including graphic novels, are also defining new reading practices in English. In choosing to engage with modality, English
subjects are transformed into dynamic spaces, requiring teachers to work within multiple theoretical frames. This is particularly pertinent in more recent debates around graphic novels as a mode of contemporary literature. The power of graphic novels is embedded in the linguistic and illustrative elements of their construction, which inform readers’ understanding of how meaning is structurally designed. Graphic novels encompass a unique aesthetic that enriches and challenges traditional constructions of narrative storytelling. This is evident in the following definition:

Graphic novels constitute a unique medium of communication with its own aesthetic form, codes and conventions, language and ideology. They are a hybrid of image and word, of art and literature. (Esquivel, 2006, p. 36, cited Pantaleo, 2011, p. 114)

The merging of text and imagery in the graphic novel draws the reader into an arena of contemplation that is at once material and immaterial. This is a phenomenon, however, that can be applied to both print and non-print text. Furthermore, it is one Goodwyn (2013b) associates with print literature as a psychological state in which “the intensity of the reading experience is such that the material world fades away” (p. 151). Thinking about genres like graphic novels, therefore, can begin by reconceptualising the aesthetic of current literary forms, including children’s print literature. Children’s books, for example, rely on both visual and textual forms of language to convey depictions of plot, character, setting and place. Often it is the combination of these signs that contribute to the pleasure and memorability of reading, enabling the child to make predictions and recall elements of the story. Similar to childhood’s imaginative encounter with books, graphic novels can renew creative agendas in the secondary classroom. The shared conversations around image, text, reader and meaning critically deepen students’ understanding of print and modal forms. To draw a distinction between text and image, as critics of multimodality would do, seems implausible; “words in books have always come embodied in and in the company of other material signs” (Fraista and Loizeaux, 2002, p. 6).

Furthermore, through digital projects students participate in authentic acts of collaboration, which empower them as current and future producers. Jenkins et al. (2006) speaks of a participatory culture, which invites students to reconsider what significant concepts like literature, production and creativity really mean. English classrooms embracing modality and multi-literacies are a microcosm of literary and social change. Whilst Moon (2001) forewarns that technological convergence may not necessarily banish the conditions of inequality or deliver the promises borne of democratic imagining, Goodwyn’s (2001) vision, like Beavis’ is more positive. Goodwyn emphasises the importance of digital inclusion and collaboration as part of a democratic understanding of culture and citizenship. The inclusion of a digital
repertoire as part of English’s stabilising core makes the ideals of civic participation genuinely possible. Thomas (2008) summarises this point, arguing in favour of collaborative projects developing students’ “values, citizenship and ethics education through their participation in the communities in which such texts are produced” (p. 686).

3.6 SUMMARY

Chapter Three examined the literary discourses related to English teaching that are essential to framing the kinds of questions researchers ask about the importance of literature in context of the passionate ideals and democratic contexts influencing definitions and practices. The chapter began with a focus on the influence of democratic and ethical discourses. Democratic discourses are particularly shaping approaches to literature and English teaching, in ways that respond to global ideals of egalitarianism, citizenship and cultural tolerance. The discussion followed with an exploration of aesthetic and critical discourses related to inspiring passion, creativity and pleasure, emphasising the role literature has within English in transforming the lives of individual readers. The chapter concluded with three sections dealing with heritage and progressive perspectives on literature and its relationship to English. These perspectives included issues related to canonicity, literary theory and the influence of multimodality on traditional constructions and approaches to literature. Chapter Three marks the end of the literature review.

Chapter Four examines issues framing the research method and design. The chapter begins by establishing a view of research as a joint social practice and critical inquiry, in order to elicit and develop an understanding of how teachers discursively construct representations of literary practice that are personally meaningful to them and socially situated in broader critical contexts. Narrative inquiry is a broad field, so the chapter explores in-depth the epistemological and theoretical understandings that frame this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

FRAMING THE RESEARCH – EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHOD

4.0 INTRODUCTION

Locating a paradigm to frame the study and its intents presented a paradox. Delving into the teachers’ stories, particularly those they narrate about their beliefs, values, and practices of V.C.E. English is a professional and personal territory into which research potentially intrudes. I had to be careful in negotiating what approaches to take toward eliciting teachers’ stories. Furthermore, negotiating how to interpret and analyse their disclosures, without undermining the integrity of the encounter was paramount. Narrative inquiry is a broad field. The art of exploring these narratives and critically interpreting their construction, positioning the researcher as co-narrator and analyst, required a broad theoretical framework to encompass her role. I tried various approaches, before identifying and making decisions about those that would simultaneously allow teachers’ voices to be heard and elicit critical understandings. The process of locating a paradigm began as a quest to reconcile research as both social practice and critical inquiry, yet the richness of the study emerged through enabling this contradiction to exist.

The qualitative researcher works within an interpretive space, adopting a critical eye to analyse through multiple lenses the significance of how individuals experience the social world. Qualitative research, and narrative inquiry as one of its methodological branches, is embedded in the experiential; its nature validating as knowledge the subjective realities individuals construct of their experiences. The precarious role of the researcher is to therefore, be aware of her own presence in what is a relational inquiry. The researcher is always in relation to her research subjects and the phenomenon under study, which further complicates her narratological and analytical roles. Research issues pertaining to methodology, which arise from these considerations, are explored in this chapter, drawing the readers’ attention to the justifications and implications of the decisions made by the researcher as she negotiated storied landscapes, endeavouring to interpret these in a critical light.

Chapter Four begins with a discussion of research as a social practice and critical enquiry then moves into a consideration of epistemology, providing a knowledge framework for understanding the view of language, narrative and experience that informs the study. A critique of narrative inquiry as a research methodology is also advanced, so too is a consideration of interviews as method. A discussion of approaches to narrative and discourse analysis is also explored in the chapter, with particular emphasis on how these philosophically relate to constructions of knowledge and language. The discussion of methodology in its entirety is
epistemologically connected to social constructivist, narrative, and critical perspectives on the nature of experience.

4.1 RESEARCH AS SOCIAL PRACTICE AND CRITICAL INQUIRY

This research emerged from an interest in teacher’s experiences of senior English curriculum and their stories of literary practice, with particular emphasis on the subjective ways of knowing, and discourses that shape their constructions. From the outset I sought a paradigm that would simultaneously enable description and critique of these constructions. There needed to be some connection between teachers’ first person narratological accounts and the broader social and critical understandings underpinning how these are negotiated and represented. The resolution was attained through a triangulated qualitative paradigm that enabled me to think with stories and about them. I was able to move between living and retelling stories in narrative tradition, toward more contemporary social antecedents which assert the “storyteller does not tell the story so much as he/she is told by it” (Andrews et al., 2008, p. 3).

Qualitative paradigms are traditionally linked to research in human disciplines and Social Sciences as they are aimed at “describing and clarifying human experience as it appears in people’s lives” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 132). Whilst the nature of human experience can be viewed from differing ontological and epistemological frames, what informs qualitative studies like this one is a recognition of knowledge and practices as inextricably tied to social constructions and interpretations of identity and cultural norms (Walford, 1991). An emphasis on understanding social constructions is part of the allure of working with qualitative paradigms in the field of education. Qualitative paradigms elicit and value experiential knowledge, recognising the subjectivities of the ‘knower’ and partialities of the researcher in co-constructing and contextualizing meaning. To embrace a qualitative paradigm is to therefore, acknowledge that individuals construct a version of the social world (in this study the microcosm of V.C.E. English) and their identity within it in terms of their interaction with others and broader experiences. In this sense “no final construct of knowledge reigns because what is known is continuously modified as new knowledge adjusts into already existing constructs of knowledge” (Van Wysberghe & Khan, 2007, p. 8). The opportunity to explore the relationship between the teacher as knower and his/her embedded contexts is fundamental to this research. The eight teachers of V.C.E. English who participated in the study are educated and practiced in ways of knowing, enacting and articulating literary practices, which extend beyond the immediacy of their school contexts and the V.C.E. English Study Design. They are positioned in contexts in which the history of the English subjects, digital globalization and democratic views of literary study impact on existing personal and social constructions derived from their immediate settings. In privileging their voices and valorising their experiential knowledge I am empowering their role in the research as agentic storytellers of these contexts:
the explicit and implicit dimensions of these. Paradoxically by choosing what to attend to in their stories, working within them as narratives and outside them through discursive analysis, I am a co-agent in their representations.

Issues of voice and representation are entangled in a research nexus, which through inquiry and interpretation is both social and critical practice. The researcher’s immersion in the social world she studies enables her to adopt an emic perspective; to see the meanings her subjects attribute to it. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note the situated role of the qualitative researcher’s practice:

Qualitative research is a situated activity locating the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. The practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations... to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Navigating relationships and dialogue within the social world in order to elucidate an understanding of a phenomenon is an integral part of qualitative research. The bulk of this thesis is written in the third person, in the style of objective scholarly genres. However, I draw the readers’ attention here to my presence as the ‘I’ of the text. This thesis emerged from my interest in textuality and English teaching. To a degree I already possess the emic perspective; I am an ‘insider’ in the community I researched. I am a teacher of English and English literature, tertiary educated in Literature and conversant in matters of curriculum, practices, and debate, which shape my role as educator. The teachers I interviewed were conscious that we share an interest in, and knowledge of, the research site. I was conscious too of the implications of our rapport, identifying with Shah’s (2006) reflections:

While I was aware that my responses might bias the interview, I was also conscious that I was asking a great deal... in the way of their time, cooperation and confidences... matters which they had every reason not to disclose to a stranger. (p. 211)

To possess the emic perspective is problematic, which makes self-reflexivity increasingly important to a qualitative methodology. Practising self-reflexivity diminishes the possibility of the researcher impressing her experience and views onto teachers’ stories. To truly operate from an emic stance is to see the world beyond my own constructions of reality. The narratives, which comprise this thesis, have been reconstructed in an attempt to offer an authentic account of the experiential knowledge and practices of the community of English teachers I interviewed. I have drawn on ethnographic principles, describing these encounters in the contexts they emerged, consciously resisting through reflexive awareness, the temptation to review their
significance within a pre-conceived theoretical framework (Bernard, 2002). However, in the act of interpreting and writing these I remain present in their construction; and in the selection of vignettes and metaphors a veil of my own subjectivities may have inadvertently been preserved. This study therefore stakes no claim on objectivity but seeks recursive validity, which adds “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry” (Flick, 2002, p. 227 cited Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5). The view of recursive validity specifically underpinning the study is akin to Cho and Trent’s (2006) definition:

Informants in a research process that values recursive validity are involved throughout the inquiry...and their perspectives are valued both seriously and over time. (p. 334)

The act of ‘writing up’ draws together the voice of the participants in the field, the voice of the inquirer and the discourses of the disciplinary literature (Segall, 2001) enabling the researcher to write from the field and of the field. Through the act of reading and writing culture, the researcher also inhabits the etic perspective; the ‘outsider’ view, stepping outside the immediate frame to consider the broader contexts and interactions that make it significant. The etic perspective encourages the inquirer to move beyond narration to a critique of the cultural practices she has collaboratively sought to experience. The duality of the researcher’s role as insider and outsider entailed in this study is philosophically embedded in the reflective and narrative turns in social ethnographic research. The discussion reflects my interest in narrative and discourse; valorising how teachers talk about literary practice in English as a microcosm of their experience against a macrocosmic view of the socio-political ideas informing their constructions. Through these two approaches: narrative and discourse, what has emerged is a thick description of how a case of eight Victorian senior English teachers experience, know and view literary practice in the Units 3/4 V.C.E. English course.

4.2 EPISTEMOLOGY: LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE AND EXPERIENCE

The narrative inquiry paradigm framing this study is concerned with particular views about the nature of experience and language, which at first seem incongruous. Teachers’ experiences of literary practices in V.C.E. Units 3/4 English are viewed as socially mediated yet personally lived, and ideologically constructed through language. To understand the nature of these experiences I adapted a multifaceted approach to epistemology and method to frame the inquiry. I began with social constructivism, yet eventually turned to critical theory to support a view of language as narrative and discourse. Frost et al. (2010) advocates the usefulness of such designs in making sense of ‘data’:

Considered together, the layers of interpretation can provide an array of
perspectives of participants’ accounts of their experiences. Considered separately, different interpretations of data can provide views from different dimensions from which the one(s) of most relevance to the researcher can be extracted. (p. 443)

Locating the study in a broader philosophical and methodological frame also focused the study’s concerns with language: language as words, images, artefacts, narrative and discourse. To achieve an understanding of “the life-world as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings.” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 84), language as a social, ideological, and storied phenomena, was emphasised. Language is part of the Units 3/4 English teacher’s ‘work’ embedded in reading and composing texts. There are specialist disciplinary discourses for talking about literature and practice too, which are articulated in sites including the Study Design, Meet the Assessors forums and other professional activities. Then there are the hidden languages – debates, documentation, and histories of English these teachers ideologically position themselves in relation to or in contestation of. The narrative method of the study is interviewing; a recursive, reflexive, dialogic interaction in which words are artefacts too. Finally, the representations of these teachers’ knowledge is depicted in words; as narrative and discursive vignettes, concerned with language as story, positioning, and subjectivity. As Patel (2006) notes, “language is how we think and how we know. It is a scaffold, not a marker. It speaks us” (p. 24). The researcher articulates her understanding, drawing on different approaches to language and experience. She is the ‘bricoleur’ or maker of quilts; piecing together representations that take “new forms as the bricoleur adds different tools, methods and techniques of representation and interpretation to the puzzle” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4).

Theoretically, the concept of the bricoleur describes the narratological and analytical practices at the core of this research endeavour. Through attending to language as narrative, text and discourse, I was immersed in weaving together themes and metaphors, to create layers of meaning.

4.2.1 Epistemological Considerations

The narrative inquirer enters into a storied landscape, a seemingly distinct territory until she seeks to make sense of meaning and finds the borders of narrative and other epistemological understandings conflict. Narrative is an evolving paradigm, one that is shaped by each researcher’s questioning of the nature of experience: the nexus of personal and social knowledge, the role of language in knowing and the possibilities and limitations of what can be known and in what ways. Each inquirer makes the territory her own; bringing new understandings of how we can understand peoples’ lives as they meaningfully experience them. Epistemology is the theoretical foundation for her exploration as it is “concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired” (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p. 1). It also
metaphorically creates the distinct borders of her narrative territory, which are necessary to locate a reading of her work. Clandinin and Huber (2001) highlight the narrative inquirer’s initiative in strengthening inquiry, by using differing epistemological and ontological perspectives to shape its form:

Differences in views of reality, knowledge developed from an inquiry, the relationship between experience and context, and the relationship between researchers and participants all shape borders [learning] from differing epistemological and ontological assumptions so as to strengthen the future of narrative research. (p. 14)

In marking the borders of my inquiry, I found it necessary to work within a selection of epistemological frames, for narrative is more than storytelling and language as its tool, is more than personal expression. I sought to look at stories as personal and social constructions of experience, in which the use of metaphors and other structures reveal connections to discourses about literary practice that have evolved through debates, shifts and formations of the English subjects. In essence, in positioning narrative as experiential and lived (Conle et al., 2006) we can view our lives as enacted narratives (MacIntyre, 1981), and our lives as enacted through language. This conceptualisation of narrative and language in relation to experience is framed by two epistemological stances: constructivism and critical theory.

4.2.2 From Constructivism to Critical Theory

An epistemological stance on narrative inquiry embodies the view of human lives as enacted narratives (Clandinin 2007; MacIntyre, 1981). Humans are by their nature storytellers, living in an evolving, shifting, and changing storied landscape. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) note, “we live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self descriptions” (p. 380). According to an interpretivist viewpoint no singular truth exists, nor is knowledge fixed and experience universally defined. Individuals co-construct representations of their experiences through interaction, and by doing so position themselves as knowers, and their articulation of experience as knowledge. This fundamental principle creates the borderland of constructivist epistemology and critical theory underpinning the study. A perspective of personal experience as subjective, and social experience as relational and evolving, underpins constructivism. How these ways of knowing are discursively situated in socio-political and ideological contexts reframes the study as a critical inquiry.

Constructivism recognizes “human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it” (Schwandt, 2000) through their observation, interaction and experience of
the social world (Von Glasersfeld, 1995). Constructivism therefore, offers a framework for interpreting the relationship that exists between the ‘knower’ and her community of practice, which is suited to investigations of professional identities, faculties of knowledge and curriculum (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Walford, 1991). However, the term constructivism encompasses an array of theoretical positions about knowledge creation.

The view of constructivism advanced here begins with a consideration of John Dewey’s account of experience, which unifies the individual subjective and socially intersubjective dimensions of knowledge into one theoretical frame (Vanderstraeten, 2002). The terms ‘knowledge’, ‘knowing’ and ‘experience’ are problematic terms, which situate this inquiry in specific ways. The teachers are perceived, through the interactive and dialogic nature of human experience, as complicit in the construction of particular disciplinary practices and ‘ways of knowing’ within V.C.E. English. This delineation of knowledge from knowing, is shaped by Deweyan thought in which “knowledge represents the end of inquiry [and] ‘knowing’ means inquiry in a world that is not static... into things ‘lived’ by people” (Boyles, 2006, p. 8). As Dewey (1929) notes:

Experience is of as well as in nature... Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what are experienced. … Experience thus reaches down into nature… it stretches. That stretch constitutes inference. (4a – Experience and Nature)

Dewey’s transactional ontology of human experience positions narrative inquiry as a relational study. The motif of experience as ‘indefinitely elastic’ seems particularly pertinent in Dewey’s depiction, for it implies a view of living stories as reflexive and recursive; reaching forward and reflecting backward, seeking inwards and relating outwards. Dewey characterizes the relationship between the organism and its environment, as the ongoing, simultaneous doing and undergoing of experience. This ‘cumulative process of interaction’ creates a view of human beings as “constantly undergoing change and striving for control” (Campbell, 1995, p. 71), in an environment where experiences are connected by time and continuity. As a narrative inquirer choosing to work with experience as a storied phenomenon, I attended closely to this concept of continuity, to the “the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). The term ‘imagined’ highlights the conceptual nature of knowing and action. Present experiences are imbued by aspects of the past, and through reflection are carried forth (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). Understanding the significance of the underlying themes, metaphors, and patterns of association in these teachers’ stories meant finding what Dewey (1929) describes as a commonplace of existence.

The catching up of human individuals into association...is a manifestation of a commonplace of existence. Significance resides not in the bare fact of
association, therefore, but in the consequences that flow from the distinctive patterns of human association. (Dewey, 1929, 175 – *Nature and Communication*).

Beginning the inquiry with Dewey in mind created the commonplace, much needed given English takes on many forms in different places. Despite their different school contexts and professional experiences of teaching V.C.E. Units 3/4 English teachers come into association through curriculum, texts, disciplinary practices and ideas, and the language through which understanding of these things are shared. The narrative inquirer too by being in association with her research participants, pays attention to the dimensions of this commonplace, knowing the stories she is told are the “confluence of social influences on a person’s inner life, social influences on their environment, and their unique personal history” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 41). Through narrative inquiry these smaller, subjective stories, and the tensions between these become interwoven into the bricolage, a multilayered narrative of English teaching, which too is shifting and changing in the moment of its production.

Although Dewey’s epistemological stance values the sociality of knowing, the ideological dimensions of knowing need further extrapolation. In one sense, constructivism, as the antecedent of social constructionism, recognizes that in any community of practice there are individual interpretations of culture, whereby individuals have their own socially intersubjective and personal subjective stories to tell (Berger & Quinney, 2004). The constructivist view emboldens the study of personal narratives, privileging no dominant social reality or master narrative over the smaller ones we tell. However, it is inadequate when considering the internal politics of knowledge producing communities, or the effects of power differentials on the types of knowledge produced (Phillips, 1995). Narrative researchers have a responsibility to “practice inquiries that make sense to the public and those we study” (Priessle, 2006, p.636). To be faithful to such a pursuit places a responsibility on the inquirer to search for more critical frames.

The search for a critical frame began in the formative days of this research design, prompted by the limitations of constructivism to articulate the study’s intent. I was particularly searching for an epistemology that took account of language as a tool of human relations, which positions our understanding of the world. As Verhesschen (1999) notes: “To say something about reality implies the use of language... there is no position outside of language” (p. 5). As a symbolic system, language enables us to articulate ideas in relation to the world: from personal, moral, and aesthetic views to social and ideological constructions. Wortham (2001) in his analysis of teachers’ literary classroom discussions proposed that teachers, much like novelists, adopt political and ethical positions in relation to ideological issues such as social class. Wortham reinforced his observations with an account of Bakhtin’s definition of ‘voice’ to assert a view of
the social world as comprising multiple groups, in which speakers draw on differing ideological commitments and positions within it:

All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life. (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 293)

The teachers’ voices in this study are part of the bricolage of English teaching being analysed. In order to weave a bricolage of V.C.E. English, threading together these ‘voices’ seemed pertinent to the cause. How English teachers’ position themselves socially, historically and ideologically in relation to English, particularly the role of literary practice, provide at least some of the colourful threads of this evolving patchwork quilt. Narrative inquiry in this sense moves beyond founding notions of constructivism to pushing at the borderlands of critical theory. Whilst social constructivism acknowledges the socialised conditions of knowledge generation, noting, “our constructions are the product of social forces, either structural or interactional” (Burr, 2003, p. 20) it limits an exploration of ideology. These social theorists concur with postmodernists in cautioning against master narratives that provide a perceived objective account of knowledge, which marginalizes those whose smaller stories are not readily aligned to it. Narrative inquirers ascribing to this view recognise the value of studying the narratives of lived experience as opposed to the master narratives of expert knowledge, understanding small stories can provide alternative and valid ways of knowing. This study is structured around small stories, sensitive to the metaphors and images embodied in separate tellings. However, the discursive patterns interwoven across these infer the presence of master narratives: those of democracy, culture and aesthetics. As a researcher I need to account for these divergent threads.

By employing discourse analysis, making connections between language and inherent ideologies, this study is reliant on critical theories, in ways not generally associated with narrative inquiry. The study epistemologically draws upon elements of critical theory, repositioning the study, from narrative retelling to discursive critique. Whilst the personal stories narrative inquirers elicit are compelling, I would argue that making sense of these stories against the broader backdrop of human relations potentially enriches the knowledge we draw from these. Language conveys ideas that are more than socially and culturally mediated; language is political. I tread carefully respecting the notion of ‘borderlands’, the theoretical spaces in which narrative inquiry encounters other research methods (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). Narrative inquirers are hesitant to cross the threshold of description into the territory of critique at risk of violating the relational ethics of inquiry or the imposition of knowledge, which silences or makes judgment of the voices they seek to represent. I do not seek to diminish
such a risk; it is a real and valid cautioning, for inquiry within the borderland is itself a relation of struggle. However, by attending to the particularities of the individual stories, and valuing the relational processes of these, the researcher maintains the integrity of the inquiry. In thinking with stories she engages in a process through which “we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as of allowing narrative to work on us” (Morris, 2002, p. 169)

Critically analysing narratives does not constitute reducing these to ideologically scripted products. Critical analysis creates another lens for working with narratives – what I conceive of as an outward relation. Traversing this territory seems necessary if we are to engage with the notion of inquiry within narrative inquiry. Critical theory and constructivism do not comfortably abide as neighbours, for they are based on competing ideologies about the nature of knowledge as constructions of powered relations, albeit often unconsciously, versus privately and socially mediated meaning. However, in working along the border we come to see that stories are lived and narrated in a landscape that is personal and social, yet historical and ideological too. In traversing the borderland I am recognising, from a critical viewpoint, that meaning is relational and situated, and our actions and discourses are expressions of this context. Individuals in a specific culture construct and attach meaning to its beliefs and practices in a way that is not incidental. Constructivist epistemologies help frame what these meanings are. However, critical theory embodies a framework for understanding how “dominant ideological practices and discourses shape our vision of reality” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) and in turn, how we position and re-position ourselves in relation to them. Linking these two distinct territories within the study is a view of language, which encourages its treatment as both narrative and discourse.

The treatment of language as narrative is embedded in a constructivist frame, with social constructionism as its socio-cultural dimension. In a constructivist paradigm language is at the heart of experience, in the Deweyan sense of an experience as constituting a meaningful encounter between the individual and her environment. Dewey considered language to be the “tool of tools... the cherishing mother of all significance” (Dewey, 1929, 186 – Experience and Nature). Language is the means through which we relate to our world and create relationships within it. Language therefore, enables us to live within our interior life worlds, simultaneously sustaining social relations, by fashioning the ways we describe ourselves, and our realities.

Language...presupposes an organized group to which these creatures belong, and from whom they have acquired their habits of speech. It is therefore a relationship, not a particularity. (Dewey, 1929, 18s- Nature and Communication)

Narrative inquirers traditionally view life as a storied phenomenon, yet these stories are not
communicated in tidy narrative forms. The complexity of interpreting the story emerges from the subjectivity of language, rendering its form both referential and differential. The stories we live by and the language we use to express these are imbued with subjectivities, intuitive ways of knowing and abstract, symbolic ways of thinking, which move beyond the immediate referential context in which narratives are told. Bresler (2006) in a narrative inquiry into music education, expressed the relationship between narrative and language in the following way:

Language is clearly larger than narratives, referring to the field of possibilities and shared conventions. Language shapes our perceptions, conceptualization, and sensitivities, our very vision of reality and what we attend to.... Language engenders the various facets of our living – from social behaviour to abstract thoughts and the qualities of our feelings. (Bresler, 2006 p. 24)

Operating within a critical paradigm, language can also be viewed as discourse. Through language we ideologically construct representations of our identities, experiences and knowledge. This does not suggest individuals are simply human records of socio-political history without free agency to construct their own private stories. Indeed critical theory espoused by Foucault and others of the French philosophical school, acknowledge individuals can emancipate themselves from dominant ideological positioning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Critical theories expand the scope of inquiry, developing out of poststructuralist traditions they offer another set of lenses for interpreting and critiquing language. The term ‘discourse’, which is expanded on in the next chapter, like ‘knowledge’ is a problematic term. Discourse as a narrative term focuses on the temporal order and the stylistic features of the individuals storied experience. Discourse as a critical term views language as ideological, constituting personal, social and institutional ideas (Gee, 1990). Foucault’s epistemic stance on discourse particularly augments this view of language as constructing the socio-political world and relations of power within it, suggesting:

Discursive practices [have] a type of systematicity which is neither logical nor linguistic...[They] are characterised by the demarcation of a field of objects, by the definition of a legitimate perspective for a subject of knowledge, by the setting of norms for elaborating concepts and theories. Hence each of them presupposes a play of prescriptions that govern exclusions and selections. (Foucault, 1994, p. 11)

From a Foucauldian perspective we can work with teachers’ recounts as an ontology of the present, cognisant that notions of power and knowledge are inherently embedded in these as a result of past and ongoing subjectification. Secondly, this perspective complements a view of
the symbolic function of language from a critical post-structuralist view, in which “lives are narratable as coherent in terms of the categories language makes available” (Belsey 2002, p. 51). The appeal of working within this frame is evident in Tamboukou’s (2008) narrative study of female artists. A Foucauldian approach to inquiry, she suggests, creates possibilities for genealogy to ask new questions and interrogate truths. In quoting Braidotti (1991), Tamboukou shows how a Foucauldian perspective can open up the space in inquiry to explore the subjectivity and materiality of ideas:

The fact that they [ideas] exist in an in between space caught in a network of material and symbolic conditions, between the text and history, between theory and practice, and never in any one of these poles (p. 113).

Whilst this study does not embody a complete methodology of Foucauldian analytics, it is evident in its inquiry. The V.C.E. English subject is discursively constructed, historically, institutionally, and textually as an embodiment of ideas. The documented histories, study designs and course materials provide one lens for situating constructions; the interviews with teachers are another. The concept of research as a ‘genealogy of the present’ informs the critical ethnographic approaches to interviewing and discourse analysis adapted in this particular narrative inquiry. Furthermore, it contributes to a philosophical interest in individual and experiential narratives. This study seeks not to transform teachers’ literary constructions, rather to create an understanding of these, opening spaces for discussion. Foucault, by defining power as a relation and not an entity to be possessed, suggests we can emancipate ourselves from the master narratives, which complements narrative inquiry’s stance, that we are always in relation, and through inquiry come into new relations of understanding.

Narrative inquiry is an evolving research field, having emerged in the mid-twentieth century from research fields, which have left their traces along its borderlands. Narrative inquiry’s divergent beginnings and crossovers between theoretical traditions, creates what Andrews et al. (2008) describe as ‘theoretical fault lines’ (p. 3), shaping the narrative landscape in problematic ways. Narrative inquiry is a contested territory in which the quest to understand the lives of individuals and their experiences in a particular time, place and social context do not adhere to strict rules about its governance. Narrative inquirers gather stories in many forms: letters, journals, art and written life histories in addition to interviews, as used here (Clandinin, 2007). Divergence exists too in how the inquirer approaches analysis and the epistemological stances she works from in attending to the particular or general (Andrew et al., 2008). The inquirer proceeds knowing that in altering her methodology, so too she alters what is found within the narratives.
Clandinin (2007) in mapping the methodology describes the ‘intersections’ employed to reconcile narrative inquiry by researchers who come to narrative from differing traditions, inspired to work with lived stories into human knowledge and interaction. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) suggest the following as a kind of consensus between these researchers, from which a definition emerges:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and they interpret their past in terms of these stories...Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 375)

Narrative is envisioned as two threads entwined within this particular inquiry: our lives are enacted narratives, and by abstraction, our lives are enacted through language. The first position connects narrative to identity; narrative is viewed as representing experiential and lived experience. Conle (2000) describes the work of narrative theorists in establishing how the stories of human endeavour can only be understood if “they are seen as moments of possible, or actual, histories, and our lives are understood as enacted narratives” (p. 192). Narrative is both a product and process through which understanding and new directions emerge as the stories unfold. The ethnographic approach to interviewing, the mapping of resonant themes, and attention to the particular distinctions of individual narratives is aligned to this perception. The second position explores the interconnected relationship of experience to language, as forms of narrative and discourse. This view is the foundation for generating field texts and composing narratives from these, which are presented in this study as vignettes of stories we live by and significant discourses of knowing. Individuals’ lives are enacted as stories. Furthermore, people construct their own stories within cultural, historical and ideological discourses. Issues of how the narrator constructs her story of identity and experience through resistance, challenge and transformation of these discourses are central to its cause (Chase, 2005).

4.3 NARRATIVE INQUIRY METHOD

Finding a place to situate narrative inquiry begins with a deeper reflection on recent narrative turns, which constitute its emergence and development as an independent research method, and some scholars suggest an emerging epistemology. Hendry (2009) makes claims to narrative method as the embodiment of all research, citing Bakhtin, Barthes, Bruner and Ricouer to argue “the epistemological roots of the scientific and humanistic traditions can be traced to narrative when narrative is understood as the primary way in which humans make meaning” (p. 72). However, the development of narrative methodological practice and theory in its entirety is beyond the scope of the thesis, so I advance here an understanding of it, as it informs this particular inquiry and research into teachers’ lives. The origins of contemporary narrative
methodologies are aligned with two 20th century philosophical developments. The first of these narrative turns stems from post war moves within the fields of sociology and psychology, toward person centred, and holistic inquiry, as alternatives to positive empiricism. The second turn beginning with Russian structuralism, and later shaped by French poststructuralist, postmodern, psychoanalytic and deconstructionist traditions were marked by an analytic shift in narrative concerns (Andrews et al., 2008). Whilst the first turn attended to personal narratives including case studies, autoethnographies and life histories, evident in contemporary designs (Bertaux 1981; Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne 1988; Sarbin; 1986), the second attended to issues of consciousness and relations of power, within which narratives are constructed (Parker 2003). According to Andrews et al. (2008) this second conceptual development acknowledged “multiple, disunified subjectivities, rather than singular, agentic storytellers and hearers, and it was preoccupied with social formations shaping language and subjectivity” (p. 3). Despite epistemic differences informing the turns, contemporary narrative inquirers are often conceptually influenced by both developments, as is the case with this current study. This study also cannot escape its connection within the humanist and critical traditions of the two. In-depth experiential narratives of teachers’ perceptions stem from the first turn, whilst the study’s perspective of subjective knowing as relationally and discursively constructed connects with the second. Narrative inquirers in negotiating these turns espouse different understandings of language, discourse, and subjectivity, affecting the composition of research texts.

Elbaz-Luwisch (2006) describes narrative turns, which since the 1960s/1970s have particularly contributed to narrative inquiry’s place as a significant contender in the study of teachers’ lived experiences. Narrative has evolved since the work of inquirers, including Jersild (1955) and Cole (1997), who mapped themes for describing the personal dilemmas practitioners encountered in professional practice. The contemporary turn toward narrative inquiry in education, which finally came as a response to the work of Bruner (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988) and other psychologists, has been inspired by inquiries into the lived experiences of teachers’ lives. Among those who established the contemporary narrative turn within teaching were Clandinin and Connelly, whose view of narrative as a way of knowing resonates in narrative studies. As Clandinin, Downey and Huber (2009) note, the turn toward narrative inquiry has enabled practitioners to develop complex understandings of teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes, “as another dialectic between each teacher’s personal practical knowledge and the social contexts in which teachers live and work” (p. 141). Narratives of teachers’ lives constitute many stories: stories of curriculum, identity, change, and diversity. Creating narratives of meaningful experience, attending to the voice of those we interview and fostering new relations of meaning is the aspirational work of narrative inquiry, within the turns of Social Science and education, and this study too (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
4.3.1 Five Lenses for Inquiry

Navigating the plethora of methodologies, which constitute narrative inquiry I entered into a disputed territory in which too many mapmakers were shaping the one landscape in radically different ways. In the end, I delineated several relevant areas of focus. Chase’s (2005) depiction of narrative lenses was particularly influential in the design of the research, from the treatment of teachers’ accounts as narrative and discourse, through to methodological considerations of self-reflexivity, analysis and representation. The first lens was particularly significant in the formation of the research design. Chase (2005) describes the first lens of Narrative Inquiry as a recognition and treatment of narrative as its own distinct form of discourse. Narratives are representations of experience, shaped in particular ways, because active subjects in social and ideological relation compose them. Analysing the discursive mode of these constructions creates awareness of the possibilities and limitations that shape their narration, and of the narrator’s positioning within these as author and interpreter of social meaning. However, this too is fraught with difficulty; making the particular general through approaches to narrative discourse, is a source of tension between inquirers, despite my own readiness to engage in the territory. As Riessman (1993) argues, making the particular general is a necessary beginning wherein “individual action and biography must be the starting point of analysis, not the end” (p. 70).

Understanding how narrative discourse is situated within narrative methodology begins with a view of narrative itself. Narratives exist in multiple discursive forms from literary tales to historical accounts, however, it is understood here as a reference to the personal stories teachers tell to make sense of V.C.E. English curriculum. Narrative therefore, alludes to a scholarly term in which human experience is a living embodiment of stories, in a shifting landscape of social, cultural, institutional, and linguistic relations (Clandinin, 2007). In this context, first person experiential accounts of teachers’ lives are narratological, with distinct structures and features of telling, which distinguish these as a unique mode of discourse. It is important to draw a distinction here between the terms narrative, story, and discourse. People tell stories of events, narrated as chronological sequences and/or around plot lines (Ezzy, 2002) or experiential ideas, as many in this study do. Inquirers through analysis attribute meaning to them as narratives. The teachers’ action of telling stories and the inquirer’s composition of narratives, transforming field texts into scholarly research texts, are acts of narration. The act of narration is understood as a mode of discourse through:

The conscious authorial/artistic assembly, sequencing and representation of events, artefacts, thoughts, traces, souvenirs and symbols in such a way as to convey a story. (Eagleton, 1996, p.91-92, cited Hay & White, 2005)
In essence, “story is the content of the narrative expression, while discourse is of that expression” (Chatman, 1980, p. 23). Different understandings of what narrative is, and how it can be understood, have diversified approaches to narrative discourse. Generally these approaches can be located within two shifts of thought beginning with narrative analysis as the study of text and moving toward narrative as context (Phoenix, 2008). This study approaches narrative as context; attending to the particular in teachers’ individual stories through small vignettes, open to metaphoric and poetic analysis. The microcosm, or the meso level in which these accounts are immediately grounded in context, are extended to the general through Critical Discourse Analysis of resonant ideas. In this way, teachers’ particular stories of English teaching can be connected to a broader understanding of how literary reading and writing practices are enacted in V.C.E. English.

The inquirer’s approach to narrative as a form of discourse is inextricably bound to decisions she has made regarding interview genres and the narratives she seeks to derive through these, in understanding teachers’ lives. Narrative genres are traditionally characterized as event centred and experience centred, although open ended and semi-structured interviews can elicit both kinds. Although narrative inquirers are free to draw on multiple forms of inquiry, including narrative, analytic and ethnographic approaches (Riessman, 1993), a view of language and knowledge is implicit in her choices. Working closely with narrative discourse is, as Conle (2001) argues, a valued part of the social research enterprise and central to its integrity within narrated accounts of teachers’ lives: “a narrativist in education needs to claim that the stories she tells, or writes, are comprehensible in the sense that symbolic expectations have been produced correctly” (Conle, 2001, p. 29). Conle’s view, similar to my own, is interested in adopting a critical approach to narrative. The decision work to with two approaches to teachers’ reflections, however, is complicated; these bring specific, and potentially overlapping and contradicting meanings to the fore.

The second narrative lens underpinning the study focuses on identity. As an inquirer my analysis focused on understanding how an individual constructs a view of their professional identity and the practices they enacts. The lens of identity and construction is concerned with postmodernist claims that draw connections between the kinds of stories individuals tell and the production or performance of their identities (Eakin, 1999). The idea of revealing the ‘voice’, which is quite similar to critical ethnography, is important in this lens. However, where ethnography is concerned with the anthropological and social, narrative inquiry is also interested in the personal narratives, or ‘life worlds’:

Placed against the backdrop of the disintegrating master narratives, the personal narrative responds to the wreckage, the reclaiming, and the
A perspective on narrative as a form of discourse recognises the processes and signifiers through which an individual, in communication with others, constructs a particular reality and performs a view of self that has possibilities to create resistance, acceptance, or ambivalence toward the status quo. In the context of these interactions, as in all speech events, the narrator is engaged in a performative exercise, one, which Langellier (2009) suggests, intervenes between experience and story: “where the social world is articulated, structured and struggled over” (p.128) Whilst some inquirers insist that it is the ‘big’ stories that count, Bamberg (2005) suggests that attending to personal narratives in this way, eliciting the ‘small stories’ enriches narrative traditions. Georgakopoulou (2006) reinforces this view advocating that these tellings are “important in terms of how the participants orient to what is appropriate story in a specific environment” (p. 5).

This approach to small stories is located in a discursive turn within the Social Sciences in which some conversation and discourse analysts are critiquing “the ways in which people ‘do’ narratives in the context of interactions” (see Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Taylor, 2006, cited Phoenix, 2008, p. 64). Its ideological stance stems from a radical movement away from the perceived hegemony of heavily content based, sociological interpretations of transcriptions of interviews, in which the micro-linguistic and social structures of every day encounters are overlooked (Andrews et al, 2008). However, aligning oneself with ‘small stories’ or ‘big stories’ places the inquirer on the sidelines of a great theoretical divide. This study is difficult to locate between the two. The method elicits the ‘small stories’, however, by re-composing these as field texts and subjecting them to discourse analysis, they are framed against the big story of English teaching in Victoria.

The third lens is concerned with subjectivity, exploring the social constraints and possibilities of how the narrative is told and understood within the narrator’s community. The lens is used to examine the similarities and particularities of the case by exploring patterns of themes and metaphors, which describe the identities, subjectivities, and realities created by the narrators. Narratives are inherently a social practice, elicited through talk-in-interaction, referencing ways of knowing, enactment of social practices and institutional routines (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). As narrative practice and social practice, the stories teachers tell of their professional knowledge landscapes are inevitably imbued with the subjectivities and nuances of the contexts in which they are produced. Narrative inquirers are particularly interested in subjective ways of knowing, or subjective realities, although how these are represented in the narrator’s life stories is another thread of contradiction. Andrews et al. (2008) identify the nature of this contradiction between theorists:
Subjectivity, language, the social, and narrative itself remain in contradiction. Current syntheses of the two involve for instance, maintenance of a humanist conception of a singular unified subjects, at the same time as the promotion of an idea of narrative as always multiple, socially constructed and constructing. (p. 4)

This study assumes there is no objective reality that is known, rather individual and social patterns of knowing, that with time becomes knowledge. Narrative inquirers have the liberty to attend to the individual patterns of one person’s reflection, and then map the metaphors, themes, and understandings, which resonate across a case of several others. Salmon and Riessman (2008) argue this creates a deeper understanding of “our whole standing as persons, as recognized members of human society” (p. 78). Investigating the nexus of subjectivity and professional identity in teachers’ narratives can create new relations for understanding their practice, creating an “antidote to the dominant images’ pervading dominant culture” (Sparkes, 1994. p. 9). However, there are inherent difficulties working within intersubjective relations. The relationship between the narrator and the inquirer impacts on the ‘data’ eliciting particular reactions to socio-political ideas (Bott, 2010).

The ways in which my subjectivity was perceived by the group impacted on the data itself: as a white female academic implicated in their anti-establishment, anti-liberal ideologies and this elicited particular reactions on political and social issues such as immigration and ethnicity. (p. 168)

In the act of telling, something is often lost in the translation. We can never know the interior world or experiences of the teachers we interview, as they intimately know and experience these. However, through attending to patterns, motifs, metaphors and particularities of how they, and others, represent their stories, we can come to know something of the personal, social, institutional and ideational conditions in which they exist.

The fourth narrative lens acknowledges that inquiry is an interactive form of research through which the researcher collaboratively shares in creating a meaningful story. As an inquirer I acknowledge narrative as joint production, knowing narratives are situated and performed for a particular setting and particular audience. The relationship between the narrative inquirer and the narrator is what makes this methodology unique. Huber and Clandinin (2006) in their work on relational responsibilities of inquirers highlight the significance of this relationship. Narrative inquirers are situated in a collaborative relationship in which thought must be given to responsibilities of representation. In sharing the world of the research landscape, the inquirer and the teacher come to it with reasons, which may remain unsaid. Clark (2010) suggests there are many reasons people engage in collaborative research, listing among these, subjective
interest, personal empowerment, and opportunities for self-expression, and satisfaction of curiosity. The teachers I interviewed expressed similar motivations for participating; some were curious about other teachers’ experiences, others saw it as a chance for professional development, and others as a space to reflect. This joint interest in the study created a collaborative relationship, based on a commitment to reflexivity.

Practising reflexivity is the fifth narrative lens of the study. This lens looks specifically at issues of voice, representation, and authority, within the individual stories and across the set of narrative vignettes, the inquirer composes (Chase, 2005). Clandinin et al. (2007) highlight a way of entering into this space, by attending to three commonplaces of inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality provides a way of understanding the stories teachers tell; people are always in relation, shaped by a past, evolving in the present and moving toward a salient future. Sociality situates the teachers within the personal: “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” (p. 23), social and existential conditions of their lives encouraging the inquirer’s reflexivity. The final commonplace, place, signifies the “specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries... where the inquiry and events take place” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 481). Representation and collaboration begin with attending to these three commonplaces simultaneously.

Attending to commonplaces, is a compass for inquiry, yet its course is directed by the relationship between the researchers and her participants. The quest to represent the teachers’ ‘voices’, without privileging her own is integral to the inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a participatory relationship, in which the teachers and researcher live alongside each other negotiating who they are, who they are becoming and who they are within relation to each other. Engaging in a recursive, reflexive practice is particularly important for inquirers, as we live through and tell narratives alongside our subjects. Etherington (2007) describes the dynamics of this relational role between the inquirer, narrator, and interpretations of stories:

> Stories that are told and received are therefore, influenced and informed by what tellers as well as the audience bring to the relationship from their own lives and context. All of these notions contribute to a greater recognition of the importance of the relationship between the storyteller and the audience, and between the knower and what is known. (p. 600)

Representing teachers ‘voices’ is reliant on the inquirer’s integrity to acknowledge herself as complicit in the construction of narratives and in maintaining an open, flexible, and dialogic relationship with her subjects. Clandinin (2007) asserts that it is the researcher’s self ‘with its fantasies, biases and horizons of understanding, that is the primary tool of inquiry’ (p. 545), working in subtle ways, that creates the need for her to practice reflexivity. Reflexive research
attends to the social, cultural, personal; and the contexts we live and work in as inquirers, writing into our research how these affect the approaches, interpretations and composition of research texts. In essence, our work is understood, “not only in terms of what we have discovered, but how, we have discovered it” (Etherington, 2007, p. 601). Telles (2000) in his account of working with experiential interviews articulates the richness of inquiry that emerges from privileging the ‘voice’ of the teachers, helping researcher and teachers “draw meaning from the marker events of [their] personal and pedagogical history… as sources of legitimate knowledge to be constructed through joint reflection” (p. 258). As Craig (2009) recognises, the notion of ‘truth’ in narrative inquiry is embedded in the subjective; the focus of the inquirer’s work is legitimately on attending to ‘voice’ as opposed to objectivity.

4.4 TELLING, TRANSCRIBING AND ANALYSING

In narrative inquiry, gathering stories, transcribing and analysing texts are intrinsically linked. The genre of the interview, the processes of transcription as a form of inquiry and applying the analytical lenses of language, are inextricably bound together. The organisation of these processes as telling, transcribing and analysing, is extracted from Riessman’s (1993) five levels of representation within the research process, which begin with an individual’s telling of experience until the final stage when their story is returned to them in new narrative form. The decisions the interviewer makes shapes the interaction and the nature of the narrator’s telling. The researcher’s methods of transcription selection and reduction, and the analysis they apply to these, are ultimately present in the narratives and research texts composed from these.

4.4.1 Interviews as Telling

Stories of teaching evolve within social relations and are narrated as part of an interactive community of practice. Therefore, the narrative inquirer’s method of approach needs to encompass opportunities for dialogue with the teachers whose stories she seeks to know. Interviews, within narrative inquiry, are ideally situated to provide the frame of reference in which stories can unfold, be interpreted, transformed, and critiqued. Interviews as an inquiry method have moved beyond the constraints of positivist paradigms in which they were primarily perceived as tools for the generation of objective data to be critiqued, into the domains of interpretive research. The narrative inquirer, positioned within an interpretive framework is particularly drawn to the relevance of interview methods and the richness of meaning-making as a discursive practice, involving: interaction, negotiation, and interpretation, which is fluid and contextualised (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Interview methods deployed within narrative inquiry include many approaches to eliciting life histories and experiential narratives, like those within this study, which draw on methods
deeped in sociological and ethnographic traditions. Narrative inquirers within education share sociological and ethnographic interests in the ways people experience life and construct representations of their culture, communities of practice and themselves within it. Whilst some inquirers favour narrative interviews or life histories, there are no strict rules governing interview practices within narrative inquiry. The central concern of the inquirer is to create opportunities for people to tell their stories, or as Clandinin and Connelly (2006) note, to begin with living stories. The general principle guiding the decisions the inquirer makes, and my own choices within the research, is reflected in Riessman’s (1993) reflection:

To encourage those we study to attend to and tell about important moments in their lives, it is necessary to provide a facilitating context in the research interview, which implicates the interview schedules we develop. (p. 54)

The interviews upon which this study is founded vary in approach, drawing on narrative and ethnographic approaches to inquiry. Employing interview styles commonly associated with ethnography complements the study’s interest in the experiential narratives of V.C.E. English teachers, in terms of curriculum construction and identity. Ethnographic interviews share narrative inquiry’s epistemic view of human endeavours as meaningful expressions of culture (Bernard, 2002). Ethnographic approaches therefore, transform an inquirer’s understanding of an encounter into a broader and more meaningful context by interpreting, describing, and narrating an account of it within an historical, socio-political, and personal frame of reference (Tedlock, 2000). Although there are theoretical divisions, which separate narrative inquiry and ethnography, both recognise that whilst there are many ways of observing culture, there are also intuitive and subjective ways of knowing embedded in language practices, which can construct or diversify the inquirer’s understanding of it (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). As Chase (2005) notes, there are many frames for critiquing the stories people tell, and each of these connect with specific approaches to inquiry. Combining both narrative and ethnographic approaches to ‘data’ gathering enabled me to elicit teachers’ experiences of V.C.E. English and their perspectives on literature through questioning, artefact gathering and storytelling.

The first and third round of interviews combined approaches adapted from critical ethnography and narrative interviewing styles. This was made possible because narration is both storytelling, similar to ethnographic fiction, and a social enactment of discourses in which “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing… are accepted… of particular roles, by specific groups of people” (Gee, 1990, p. xix). As an inquirer I wanted a two-fold approach: one that allowed me to become immersed in the context and interaction of the interview while simultaneously looking outwards for the emerging significance. The combination of approaches provided an opportunity for the narrator and researcher to work collaboratively in the processes of meaning-making, enabling new insights
to be gained and at the same time interactively reflected upon. As Huberman, Thompson and Weiland (1995) note, through an account of teacher interviews: “telling the story of one’s life is often a vehicle for taking distance from the experience, and, thereby, of making it an object of reflection” (p. 131). Another way of critiquing the known and subjective aspects of self and culture, and by extension teaching, is through discursive practices that allow for the personal and social dimensions of those stories to unfold.

The interviewing technique used in the second round of interviews was adapted from narrative ethnography. Instead of using questions to elicit narrative responses, the teachers were asked to reflect on their particular story of V.C.E. English teaching, bringing artefacts to show and tell these stories. The use of social artefacts (books, diaries, photos, and work samples) was used in the same vein as cultural artefacts within anthropological approaches to narrative ethnography. The reflexive ethnographer and my role as reflexive narrative inquirer share a common pursuit: we value reflection on our own subjectivities and the relationship these have to our engagement and interpretation of the field. Likewise, we are both intrigued by the dynamics of subjectivity within the culture researched. Narrative ethnography, through ethnographic approaches to interviews, provides a framework for understanding the stories people tell. Through embracing subjectivity, a narrative inquirer engaged in this style of interviewing is able to work collaboratively to produce narratives in which autobiographical stories and introspection are valued as experiential knowledge (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). The interpretation of the research emerges as the story unfolds, which enables the inquirer working with narrative ethnography to interpret what seems known and to comment on what is subjective (Wainwright, 1997).

The focus on discursive practices was part of the ‘linguistic turn’ in ethnography, driven by an egalitarian agenda in the 1960s (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). A later poststructuralist influence on the nature of critique further emphasized the importance of examining relationships through power. By the 1980s many ethnographers positioned language and discourse as the central focus of critical ethnography (Segall, 2001), whereas narrative inquirers motivated by the narrative turn, focused on narrative as a distinct mode of discourse. The critical reframing of ethnography and the linguistic turn impact on the way I construct this particular account of narrative as a critical inquiry. In drawing on critical ethnographic approaches to interviewing, I wish to distinguish the territory I work within as the borderlands of narrative inquiry. I am not a critical ethnographer, nor do I seek to contribute to a radical agenda for change, which some might suggest is the ethical responsibility of critical ethnographers (Madison, 2005). However, I have knowingly borrowed from ethnography’s critical agenda, and in doing so I am creating a critical scope within narrative inquiry to ask questions, which by their nature are ideological; questions about what English is perceived to be, what it should achieve and the place of literature within
The narrative focus frames my interest in finding the personal and cultural story. The critical focus stems from my interest in language as a reflection of social practices and the ideological contexts that frame them.

Narrative interviewing as a particular genre was adapted for use within the first interviews, and partly influences the second interview alongside critical ethnography. Bauer (1996) establishes general principles for the conduct of narrative interviews, to elicit stories. Bauer asserts that phase one of the interview should be initiated by the interviewer and based on a topic of experiential importance to the interviewee, which extends beyond personal matters to broader social and communal concern. From this point, the interviewee takes control and the interviewer remains silent until ‘coda’ or resolution is met. The researcher is constrained to asking follow-up questions that ask ‘what happened’, lest the interviewer’s opinion or attitude is made known. In the first interviews, with the exception of the initial interview prompts, these guidelines were followed. However, the long periods of silence, the restraint of being ‘outside’ the interview, when in reality I was part of its telling, felt artificial and constrained. Furthermore, given narrative inquiry is openly embedded in the relational, the apparent lack of interaction between interviewer and interviewee made it difficult to foster relationships. In contrast to the open narrative style of the second interview, the responses to the first interview yielded more depth on the role of literature than in the second interviews. However, the second fostered relationships, and in the third interviews unexpected narratives often emerged. Giving the teachers prompts to guide their thinking and being more open to showing interest in their thoughts and ideas, created a reciprocity of exchange. This contributed to new stories and new understandings, in some instances, of the teachers I was interviewing. Meaning is always subjective, and always relational; in the act of doing the interviews, I was undergoing them too. Furthermore, attending to the ‘voice’ of participants within the accord of this reciprocity in the third interviews, and analyses there after, came closest to creating a ‘polyphony’ of voices (Bakhtin, 1981).

4.5 SUMMARY

Chapter Four established the qualitative paradigm framing this study, noting the need to develop a design that respected research as a social practice and a form of critical inquiry. The chapter then moved into a focused discussion of related epistemological matters, highlighting the constructivist and critical knowledge frameworks that influenced the decision to adopt narrative and critical discourse methodologies to represent teachers’ stories. Narrative is a broad field, so the discussion focused on the five lenses of inquiry that shaped how I made sense of the field and developed my method. The design of the interviews and approaches to analysis relied upon a particular view of interviews as an act of telling, and transcription as re-telling; discussion of which concludes Chapter Four. The subsequent chapter focuses on the mechanics
of the study, introducing the teachers, and describing the interviews and techniques of analysis, which constitute the approach to narrative inquiry employed in this study.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

5.0 INTRODUCTION

The research field for this study is a theoretical site or space, which in Deweyan terms acts as a commonplace for locating the study. In the broader sense of setting, V.C.E. Units 3 and 4 English provides the field, although I am conscious of the many ways this ‘commonplace’ is configured by individual teachers, and schools. There is a need to act with integrity as a narrative inquirer, thinking carefully about the implications of voice and representation. Before commencing the research approval was sought and granted from the Griffith University Human Ethics Committee. At all stages of the research from recruitment, to interviewing, and writing up the thesis, ethical principles regarding privacy, confidentiality and integrity were maintained.

This chapter begins with a brief depiction of the teachers who participated the study, in order to describe aspects of their professional identities, which shaped their reflections or my interpretation of their words. The chapter then moves into describing the approach to interviewing undertaken, and an overview of the questions and guided prompts that framed each interview. In entering the field, I was particularly conscious the inquiry relied on establishing and building a sense of ‘relationship’ between the researcher and her participants. Over the course of the interviews some relationships, however, developed more than others, which impacted on the stories teachers told. I endeavoured to interview teachers in environments where they felt comfortable speaking and sharing. As earlier stated in Chapter Four, narrative is a relational inquiry, often uniquely shaped by the individual researcher’s choice of narrative methodology. The approach to interviewing is at the heart of her methodology, guiding the questions she asks, the moments she chooses to remain silent and ultimately, how she begins to make sense of stories elicited. The final section of the chapter explores the approach to transcription and analysis applied in the research. This is necessary to demonstrate how meaning was interpreted, drawing associations between teachers’ personal accounts of experience and their broader social, cultural and ideological frames.

5.1 INTRODUCING THE TEACHERS

In order to create a portrait of how teachers construct literary experiences in V.C.E. English, teachers who were presently teaching and conversant with the V.C.E. Study Design were recruited for the study. I underestimated the interest the study would arouse, receiving expressions of interest from over forty teachers willing and eager to discuss their perspectives on text and teaching in V.C.E. English. Teacher involvement in the project was invited via advertisements through professional associations including the Victorian Association for
Teachers of English (V.A.T.E.), and the English Edulist. Applications were followed with phone calls and emails explaining in more detail what the research was about. Of the original forty, over a dozen teachers remained interested. The majority of those who withdrew their expressions of interest were concerned about the time commitment when already working extensively in their professional lives. Only a few were concerned about narrative research, uncertain of their readiness to impart their stories and for these to be published. In selecting the final eight participants, I wanted to ensure there was a range of teachers from across school systems, and across the rural and urban divide. Having a mix of teachers ranging from graduate to experienced levels, and at least one who was an assessor of the subject, was part of the selection criteria. Eight teachers were eventually selected for participation in the study, with these criteria in mind. Strategically this created an interesting mix of teachers from across Victoria. Seven teachers worked in the government school system, three were teaching in rural regions, and three were also working as their College librarians. Two were recent graduates, and three were also assessors of V.C.E. English.

The selection of eight teachers was also grounded in narrative and ethnographic theory. A sizeable group was required to narratively map the themes, tensions and metaphors which resonate across the stories of English teachers, bringing to the fore, the shared beliefs and experiences that are pertinent to their constructions of literary practice. As part of a critical ethnographic enterprise, working with a small case of teachers enabled individual discourses to be analysed and contrasted to others, highlighting some of the broader ideological and socio-cultural issues influencing teachers’ perspectives.

The study valued teachers’ experiences, yet recognized too the peril of asking teachers to openly engage in critical and reflective dialogue. To protect the privacy of these teachers and maintain the relational integrity of narrative inquiry, pseudonyms were used in transcriptions and have been used throughout the thesis. The biographies that follow have likewise been respectfully composed. They are small insights into the teachers’ professional contexts, and my fleeting impressions recorded in the midst of the field.

5.1.1. Mary

Mary is a Teacher Librarian in a government secondary school, in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. From her first days of school she wanted to become a teacher, and as a student she enjoyed English and History. Mary studied art history and literature at university, and her passion for these areas is evident in the ways she enthuses about using visual mediums to inspire writing and her valuing of literary texts. Mary speaks quickly, raising and lowering her intonation as she dwells on particular words, for as she notes, “a turn of phrase can be so evocative”. Mary has seen many changes in senior English, having taught Year 12 English as
part of the Higher School Certificate (H.S.C.) and V.C.E. However, Mary also left teaching for a while and worked for a multimedia organisation, where she became interested in how a community adjusts to Integrated Communication Technologies (ICT). Her skill and interest in ICT flows into her classroom and also into her areas of responsibility in the school. Mary is co-Manager of the College website and creates online learning environments for her classes.

All of my interviews with Mary took place in her local library, also in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. Mary seemed to naturally fit into this landscape – the bright spaces, the enormous PlayStation screens on the wall, the magazines and shelves of books unified the visual medium with the literary one, which seemed to enshrine the two lenses through which she spoke and which I perceived her through. Our conversations changed over time. In our first interview I spent much of the time listening, however, by the third meeting the conversation flowed readily, as Mary spoke more about the personal influences on her love of reading and language, including her experiences of being the daughter of immigrant parents. One of the more intriguing aspects of interviewing Mary was the effect these interviews had on me. In the second and third interviews Mary began to ask of me those questions I had posed to her, and I found myself reflecting afterwards on my own teaching practice.

5.1.2 Grace

Grace began studying for her career in a time she claims; “there weren’t that many career opportunities for women”. She undertook her studies through a ‘Studentship’ scheme, which enabled her to pay for university and begin her career a few years later following the birth of her first child. Grace’s career has been an interesting one. In her early years she questioned whether teaching was the right career for her to pursue, taking leave for family reasons and at one stage resigning before returning to Casual Relief Teaching (CRT). It was during her years as a CRT, which Grace recalls as “probably one of the best things that ever happened to me because I learnt so much”, that she found her way into teaching. “I never looked back”. Grace is a highly experienced teacher, having taught English for over thirty years, including V.C.E. English since its trial year. Since 1996 she has worked as an English examination assessor, which shapes the way she talks about her practice; looking from within the classroom and into it from the perspective of examination. When we met she was working in a large Government secondary school in the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, having moved to the school the previous year when she was asked if she would fill in for an ESL position.

Each time I interviewed Grace it was in a different space. The first interview was upstairs in the Principal’s office of the school. Grace had just returned from lunchtime yard duty in the buildings and grounds, and I suspected she might feel too weary for an interview. However, her encounters with the students playing cricket in the upstairs wing and another group
collaborating on a story seemed to energise her. The second time we met was after hours in her Year 12 classroom and again she was in the midst of work. The last student was leaving, having stayed behind for help and Grace’s things were still spread out on the front desk. Again, Grace seemed to make a smooth transition between the end of her teaching day to sitting with me on the lounge chairs at the back of the classroom, with little more than a sigh indicating how long her day must have felt. In the first interview Grace had said “I love interacting with the kids” and in my field journal I kept a note of this to contextualise these two instances. The final time we met was in her home in the Eastern suburbs on a weekend. Sitting in the front lounge of her heritage house, the presence of books and a large photographic print of a lighthouse in raging waters reminded me of her classroom. Grace’s pleasure in books and spaces for reading, and photography-lined walls was evident in both spaces.

5.1.3 Ewan

Ewan’s experience in teaching Year 12 subjects is extensive. He has taught Year 12 Economics, Politics, Literature, and English throughout his thirty-five year career. His first degree was in Economics, and then English followed as he notes, “I love both subjects... I actually found the two were an interesting mix”. His credentials in Year 12 English are likewise extensive. He has taught Year 12 English under the Higher School Certificate (H.S.C.) and V.C.E. systems. He was on an advisory panel for the H.S.C. Group One course in the 1980s and he has been on two review committees for V.C.E. English. He is an active member of the Victorian Association for Teachers of English (V.A.T.E) and has published textbooks for English and presented Professional Development seminars too. Ewan is also an experienced V.C.A.A. assessor.

The first two times I met with Ewan were in his office on campus at a large government secondary college. Ewan is the Senior School Leader and on both occasions I arrived after hours to interview him, he was working late with meetings. Ewan talks about English practice in a manner that suggests in his view it is constantly changing. His roles as a teacher, presenter and assessor inform his diverse perspectives on the history, politics and future trends of English curriculum. Our final interview was in the lounge of his family home. Perusing Ewan’s bookshelf and finding the Australian titles that are on my own shelf at home it felt like a familiar place to interview him. Ewan’s zest for English and his quick paced, vibrant form of narration was evident in both spaces.

5.1.4 Norah

Norah teaches in a government school in the South Eastern region. There are five Year 12 English teachers including her, and they collaboratively plan and moderate assessments. Interestingly, none of the five had taught V.C.E. Units 3/4 English prior to this Study Design.
Norah had been teaching Units 1/2 English for three years and Units 3/4 for two years. Having no prior experience in other V.C.E. English course designs, she was an optimistic teacher to interview; she spoke of the revised course as “fantastic” in terms of the opportunities it gave her to develop new curriculum. Norah’s interest in curriculum is further evident in her role as the Senior Curriculum Leader in the College.

Norah’s methods are SOSE and English. She entered into teaching following a Diploma of Education degree completed after an Arts degree. In the final interview she spoke of how she wanted to work in a school like her own. Norah also attended a government secondary college in the South Eastern suburbs, which she describes as not “having a good reputation”, yet she was impressed by her teachers’ dedication. The three interviews I had with Norah were at the College; the first two in the staffroom and the final one in a private interview space in the administration building. Perhaps because we were in a more private space, or because she was about to take long service leave, this interview although the shortest of our three, was different in nature. Norah spoke more of the challenges involved in teaching, and although I wasn’t conscious of it at the time, when reviewing the transcripts I became aware that in this final interview she was questioning me too.

5.1.5 Ella

Ella has been teaching for three years, all of these as a senior English teacher in a Year 10-12 campus of a government school on the edge of the Victorian border near NSW. Ella entered into teaching for what she describes as “selfish reasons” – a love of reading, a desire to travel and an enjoyment of writing. However, in all of her interviews she focused on her students and her hopes for them. In our first interview together, which was conducted over a cup of tea at her kitchen table, she talked about enjoyment in writing – a theme she returned to in our final meeting. Her interest in writing was often reflected in the emphasis she placed on language and communication as a core skill for students, and her critique of writing and its position in V.C.E. English in general.

Our second interview was in a discussion room at the school, but our conversation began whilst sitting at her desk. Her desk was a cacophony of organised folders and books, very much a workspace. Ella was in at school planning for the next term. It was her second year as the English Coordinator, a role she was enjoying but still grappling with as she faced the challenges of leading her Learning Area through the implementation of a new course. Perhaps because we were in her workspace, this interview differed to the other two, focusing more on pragmatic aspects of practice than her thoughts and feelings about these. Our final interview was in the kitchen of her new home, in a rural town about half an hour’s drive from her school. A year had passed since our first interview, and this was the interview where I felt I got to know the most
about Ella. The creative side of Ella’s personality, and her passion for writing was most evident in the turns of our conversation. Ella was thinking on the future and planning to take leave for a while to pursue other endeavours; perhaps further study, another career, or writing was ahead of her.

5.1.6 Joy

Joy teaches in a Prep-12 College in the Victorian high plains, a school she has taught in for twenty-nine years. She frequently recalled the changes the introduction of the V.C.E. brought to schools and the culture of reading since the inception of V.C.E. English. Joy teaches V.C.E. Units 3 and 4 Literature and English. She also teaches English and German in the junior and middle school, and primary grades too. Joy entered into teaching after completing a Diploma of Education following an Arts degree. In our first interview she spoke of an early interest in journalism, which she didn’t pursue as “I was not a sufficiently outgoing person” and of teaching not as a great passion but as a ”very integral part of what I am I suppose”.

Our interviews were held in the quiet space of the school library after hours. Joy is a teacher librarian and her encounters with students, and observations of their reading habits through this role, featured in her reflections. Joy talks about English from three stances: as a classroom teacher, a Teacher Librarian, and experienced assessor. My interviews with Joy always exceeded time. She spoke slowly and considerately, clarifying her ideas, though she often claimed to be “rambling”. My lasting impressions of Joy are of her pensive self-reflections. Joy raised a point, moved to a deconstruction of it much like she was analysing a narrative, before reiterating or sometimes changing this view.

5.1.7 Kerrin

Kerrin entered into teaching as a mature age student, training in SOSE and Psychology methods. When Kerrin graduated from university, there were few SOSE/Psychology combinations advertised, so she accepted a position as a SOSE and English teacher at a rural Gippsland school. When her contract ended the school recommended her for a position at a senior campus of a large secondary college also in Gippsland, to teach V.C.E. English. Kerrin sometimes describes herself as a “fraud” and an “imposter”, her lack of formal training in English method contributing to this view. However, by not being formally trained, Kerrin has worked to create an understanding of English practice through Professional Development activities, interacting with colleagues and “reading and thinking and learning and drawing on a whole heap of elements”. In the first interview she said of her colleagues they consider her a “good English teacher”, although it was not until the final interview that she noted such a reflection about herself. Despite humble claims she makes of her background, Kerrin’s
contributions to English teaching are obviously valued in the College. When we met, Kerrin was already established as the Year 12 Coordinator in the school and had also been appointed to the role of English Coordinator. Furthermore, she teaches two English subjects at Year 12 level: English and Literature.

My first and second interviews with Kerrin were inside her senior school office. Surrounded by papers and books, Kerrin seemed relaxed and at ease. She is an engaging person to interview: she laughs frequently, speaks incredibly fast with words tumbling over each other, interweaving stories of her own life amidst those about teaching too. She gesticulates constantly, gently rolling her hands when making a finer point and wildly flailing her arms when talking about literature with passionate gusto. I was intrigued by her interest in the study, which she told me emerged from her feelings of isolation and her curiosity about the experiences of other English teachers, “we get so tied up in our school and what’s happening in our classrooms and the marking and the reporting... you don’t often get the opportunity for that dialogue”. Our final interview was in her home, which is in a small, quiet town in Gippsland. Sharing lunch at her kitchen table, the final interview unfolded more akin to a conversation and sharing of ideas. There was something more personal about this final encounter as her family came in and out of the kitchen, the cows lowered nearby and her son’s memorial rose garden outside the window was caught in the afternoon light.

5.1.8 Mark

Mark entered into teaching after returning to University at the age of 30, leaving behind a career in industry. Originally he intended to pursue Mathematics as he had training in this area, yet when this proved a difficult path to transfer into, he pursued the humanities, as he had always enjoyed English. Following his degree he went into full time teaching at a technical school, eventually changing sectors. When I met Mark he had been teaching for several years in a Prep-Year 12 Christian college in a regional city outside Melbourne. Although Mark has been teaching Year 12 English since 2003 and Year 11 English since the inception of V.C.E. English, his thirty-year career as an English/ Humanities teacher was in transition. At the end of 2008 he officially left the Year 12 classroom to take on the full time position of Resource Manager/Teacher Librarian in the school, but not all had gone to plan. He was “roped back in” for two terms in 2009, to assist his replacement and was working in the same capacity in 2010.

Mark describes himself as an ‘Old school English teacher’, valuing “reading and writing, and writing correctly”, however, this belies an enthusiasm for reading, which he seeks to inspire in his students. Mark said in our first interview “I just love books”, and this was evident each time I encountered him. Sitting in the library during school term breaks, at tables surrounded by shelves, I could sense his easy familiarity with the landscape around him. The posters on the
walls, the books scaffolding the room and the comfortable clutter of his office made this small space into an eclectic and interesting one. Before each interview began and after its closing, and often distractedly in between, we would talk about books we were reading. Mark is a varied speaker; at times his responses are slow and considered, at others quite animated, particularly when he gets on his ‘hobbyhorse’ – a favoured metaphor he uses.

5.2 NARRATIVE INQUIRY – INTERVIEWING TEACHERS

In 2010 these eight teachers of Unit 3/4 V.C.E. English who had taught the Year 12 Course since its first year of inception in 2008 were interviewed three times over the course of one year. The interviews were intended as half an hour each, however, words are the landscape English teachers operate within, and often these interviews extended beyond the allocated time. The first cycle of interviews began in the January holidays and went into the first few weeks of Unit 3. The second cycle of interviews were conducted from July – August. The final round of interviews began in the final weeks of December, finishing in the first weeks of January. The structure of the interview cycle reflects key stages of teaching throughout the year: preparing for a new year, in the midst of teaching, and finally at the year’s end when the student results are known.

Prior to each interview I sent the teachers an information sheet to prepare them for the intended focus. These interviews were not typical of traditional interviewing styles. I wanted the teachers to possess prior knowledge of the prompts so they could think on each and decide what they would like to raise within it and the stories of their teaching they would impart. In the first and final interviews I used the term prompts, as the nature of the questions asked were deliberately broad, giving the teacher the freedom to decide what key terms like literature, curriculum and practice mean to them. The formal prompts were designed to explore the nexus of the stated curriculum and the living curriculum: the meeting place of teachers’ pedagogical experiences, beliefs and interpretations of what V.C.E. English is about. I emphasised to the teachers, they could allocate time as they wished to each prompt. However, as narrative inquiry is used as method here, most questions followed from the ideas each speaker raised, and in some interviews the prompts were barely touched on as other issues came to the fore.

To broaden the ethnographic experience of the study, the teachers were encouraged to bring artefacts of their teaching into the interview space, which would create more insight into their experiences. Indeed, this was a major focus of the second interview. Some of the teachers brought items along, and these included samples of student work, examples of text response questions, the texts they were teaching and access to their Moodle, wikis and other online spaces. However, on most occasions the teachers brought only scribbled notes and their daily planners, and on some occasions no physical artefacts at all. This arose for two reasons. In the
second interview, many of the teachers reported being overwhelmed by their workloads and felt unable to prepare in this way. Interestingly many in this study shared the metaphor of “time as a precious resource”. Only three of the teachers spoke to/about/around their artefacts, the others ignoring their presence. Narrative inquirers are encouraged to work with other mediums; however, when working with English teachers, words alone can evoke a rich description of their stories. English teachers operate in a textual space and words are the artefacts of their practice – as text, expression and response. And so in this study, their words are treated as artefacts and the anecdotes they tell within their stories become the meta-narratives.

The site of the interviews is a metaphysical one: Unit 3/4 V.C.E. English. It is a documented course, reinforced by a Study Design and a common examination for all students, yet this study does not assume universality for how it is constructed by individual teachers or schools. The physical interview sites varied from local libraries, private office spaces to the teachers’ homes. Interviewing on campus was not prioritised; working narratologically means finding a particular way into the life-world of the participant to elicit stories. The term ‘constructions’ emphasises the concept of perceptions and stories; whereby story is used loosely to convey how an individual imposes an order on their experiences to make sense of them. Perceptions and stories are carried within us, and enacted through speech, so it was more important to locate spaces where the teachers felt comfortable to talk. The teachers always chose the interview site; the only restriction imposed was that there was not too much background noise to disrupt the digital recording.

5.2.1 Interview One

The first round of interviews was based around six prompts, which the teachers were sent one week prior to the interview to reflect on. The prompts were structured into three areas. The first group of prompts focused on the teachers’ personal reflections of English teaching:

Prompt 1: How/why did you become an English teacher and what ideas or developments motivate your teaching now?

Prompt 2: What, do you believe English as a senior school subject should include and/or seek to achieve and why is this important?

The second set of prompts focused on the teachers’ personal reflections on V.C.E. English teaching:

Prompt 3: What are your experiences of teaching V.C.E. English? In light of these experiences, what do you perceive as some of the issues, challenges and opportunities for teaching within the revised course?
Prompt 4: What do you consider literature to be and what, if at all, is the value and role of literature and reading within a V.C.E. English course?

Prompt 5: Creating and Presenting and Reading and Responding are closely linked to the study of texts in differing ways. Please describe how you distinguish between the teaching of texts within these two areas, with particular reference to the reading and writing practices you see as significant in each.

The final prompt focused on the teachers’ reflections on change within V.C.E. English. However, not all of the teachers had taught the previous Study Design.

Prompt 6: If you taught V.C.E. English prior to the revised course implemented in 2008, what has changed, remained the same or newly arisen in your V.C.E. teaching practice and why?

By focusing on these three areas of questioning, the study enabled some exploration of the possibilities teachers see for literature in the course, the contradictions between their individual perspectives of literature and others practices, and some understanding of how English teachers ‘meet’ the Study Design.

5.2.2 Interview Two

The second round of interviews was less structured than the first, freeing teachers to explore their understandings of English and their constructions of literature within it. There were no prior questions for the teachers to address, and it was structured as an open dialogue, allowing the teachers to control the turns in conversation, and questions to arise naturally in the moment of the exchange. These interviews expanded on the first, encouraging the teachers to reflect on what it personally means to be a teacher of V.C.E. English, and how literature and literary practices are situated within it. This interview by its nature of sharing was more personal than the first, so the proforma sent to the teachers was in the style of a letter. The teachers were invited to show and tell their story and given suggestions as to how they might present their reflections:

The items or artefacts you bring will be of your own choosing. Possible items or artefacts might be photographs of classroom practices, handouts and/or lesson plans that encapsulate aspects of your teaching, unit planners, texts or passages from texts, professional learning notes, observations, digital resources: Moodle sites, PowerPoints etc, mind maps or collages, memory boxes/scrapbooks, work samples etc.
The focus of the interview was using artefacts to shed light on the teachers’ stories around their identities and experiences of English teaching. The artefacts, descriptions of practice and metanarratives highlighted these teachers’ perceptions of the textual practices and purposes they see as valued and enacted in the V.C.E. English curriculum. The ways in which the teachers discussed, and in some instances wrote notes about their experiences, further elucidated the discourses that are shaped, challenged or reflected in their professional practice.

5.2.3 Interview Three

The final interview was framed by two intentions. Firstly, this interview was a ‘member check’. At the beginning of the interview, the teachers were asked to reflect on my interpretation of their narratives and invited to offer new insights or clarifications they saw as integral to telling their stories. I used a procedure adapted from Clandinin, taking down scribbled notes of key quotes from transcripts and of my interpretations, and sharing these. The subjectivity of inquiry was evident in these discussions; some teachers had changed their minds about specific beliefs, most agreed or refined particular interpretations, whilst some no longer recalled things that had been said. Transcribing and interpreting these interviews later, I attended to both the past and the present, looking for signs that indicated a shift in thinking or revealed the tensions, or what Clandinin (2007) terms the ‘bumping places’.

The second focus of the interview was on key prompts, which arose as I began to compose narrative vignettes of the teachers’ stories. These prompts were divided into two sections. The term ‘literature’ was deliberately omitted from the prompts, although the research interest was on how teachers construct representations of literature and its associated practices in V.C.E. English. This was intended to limit coercion of teachers to construct literary versions of English, or a false valuing of these. The phrase ‘reading and writing practices’ allowed for a broader discussion of textual practice.

The first group of prompts was aimed at eliciting further reflections on the nature of textuality, reading and writing in senior English:

*Prompt 1:* Are there particular reading and writing practices that distinguish 21st century versions of Senior English from ones that have gone before or will be more relevant in the future?

*Prompt 2:* What would be your ideal model of a 21st century V.C.E. English subject and what would it achieve?

The final prompt brought closure to the interviews. This prompt focused on understanding how the teachers would choose to write their story of English teaching. Their responses were later used to guide a ‘reading’ of their disclosures.
Prompt 3: If you were asked to write a story about being a V.C.E. English teacher in the 21st century, what would you consider important for that story to tell about teaching and/or you as a teacher?

I use the term closure, however, the closing of each interview differed significantly. Some interviews ended with the final questions and polite formalities, some ended with a curiosity on their part as much as mine as to our future plans, others were a casual parting and some a fervent agreement to meet again soon. The final interview reinforced the relational nature of inquiry, in its differing degrees of collegiality and acquaintance.

5.3 TRANSCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF FIELD TEXTS

In narrative inquiry, the record of the interview as it emerges in the field, once transcribed, is altered in meaningful ways. As Riessman (1993) writes, “there are few rules for partitioning more complex stretches from interviews that feel like narrativizations” (p. 60). The approaches to transcription in this study, evolved alongside the methods of analysis and within an epistemological understanding of teachers talk-in-interaction as personal, social and narratological. The act of transcription, and re-transcription, was simultaneously an act of interpretation and narrativization. As extracts were transcribed and analysed, metanarratives emerged, interwoven into speech, sometimes at surprising intersections of talk. The transcription and analysis of teachers’ stories cannot be distinguished from the ‘research texts’ these became. The research texts are the source of narration from which the researcher worked to develop her own narrative representation of teachers’ experience of literature and English (Conle, 2000).

I perceived the interview as an unfolding interaction in which recording speech for later transcription and reflection is an integral process of sense making. Listening to the audio recordings of interviews and attending to them on the page, heightened my self-awareness of the shared construction of meaning. In transcribing I was guided by an analytical approach, careful not to succumb to the equivalent temptation of reading for literary constructions alone (Riessman, 1993). Transcribing interviews within narrative inquiry is, however, an arduous task. Teachers’ narratives were not elicited in neatly storied form, and the task of reconstructing narratives relied on the integrity of the researcher to transcribe and analyse field texts in multiple ways. The process was painstakingly slow, with re-readings constantly forging new directions to pursue.

The initial transcriptions of each interview were partially re-transcribed in two different ways to enable an analysis of their content, creating a total of 72 transcriptions (three rounds of interviews with eight teachers, each interview per round transcribed into three series).
transcriptions for each were labelled as series one, two and three. The first series of each interview was a standard transcription. Teachers’ interviews were initially transcribed in detail, paying particular attention to the linguistic and prosodic features of speech. The second series constituted revisiting the interviews, isolating vignettes and re-transcribing these, as shown in the example given in Figure 5.1. These second series of interview segments were then re-transcribed into strophes and stanzas, denoting changes in prosodic features, repetition, and metaphor. These transcriptions were then re-analysed using poetic analysis (see Figure 5.2). I returned to the interviews a third time using discourse analysis to identify key discourses (see Figure 5.3). Discourses associated with passion, pleasure, aesthetics, democracy, ethics and citizenship, particularly seemed to frame teachers understanding of English and literary practice. Adapting a layered method of transcription and analysis, constructed a more complete portrait of how teachers narrate stories of experience, curriculum and identity in light of ideological discourses. Bell (2002) in her reflections of narrative inquiry within TESOL research, encapsulates this process of “going beyond the use of narrative as a rhetorical structure, that is, simply telling stories, to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (p. 8). By utilising the two frames, I was able to work from within the narratives and relate outwardly to the immediate relational, and ideological contexts informing these. This is evident in the re-working of the same section of transcription in figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3.

5.3.1 Narrative – Poetic Analysis

Narratives are told in many forms, and the processes used to analyse these are shaped in interconnected personal, social, and ideological ways. I began my narrative quest, inquiring into teachers’ stories by attempting to apply a Labovian model of analysis (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). However, the decontextualised treatment of narrative from interaction and the disordered nature of recorded speech, made it difficult to impose a temporal order on narrative telling. I intuitively felt the presence of narratives within the extracts transcribed, yet many did not meet the formal linguistic structures, including clausal arrangements, of Labov’s model. The search for a narrative model, which could simultaneously capture the essence of performance, and narrative form, was partially resolved by turning to Gee’s (1991a; 1991b) poetic model of analysis within the inquiry. Gee regards narrative as:

A perspective that human beings take on the way in which certain themes fall into a satisfying pattern, a perspective stemming from their social identity and the resources their social groups make available to them (p. 13)

Gee’s model provided a way of analysing field texts, using the structures of the narrator’s speech. New ways of reading the texts became apparent as metanarratives emerged within the
transcript, where meaning was not immediately recognised. Gee’s poetic analysis essentially argues that narration in oral speech does not follow linear progression and temporal order, rather it occurs “as speech produced in terms of lines and stanzas” (Gee, 1991b, cited Reis, 2000, p. 9). In the second series of transcription, reduction of the text to the core narrative was achieved through emphasizing prosodic and paralinguistic features of speech, including intonation, inflexion, rhythm, and pitch (Frost, 2009). Through systematic deconstruction of the text into strophes and stanzas, the metanarrative, in its contingent parts were gradually revealed.

As a narrative inquirer I was interested in how people tell stories, aware of the importance of metaphors in figuratively representing experience and its significance. The performative model particularly attended to the function of metaphors, recognising these as the unifying narrative structures that bind teachers’ representations of English teaching and literature. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) articulate the importance of metaphor as a lens for understanding the world of perception and experience, which this study sought to elicit:

> Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3)

The poetic analysis of texts, attending to repetition, patterns, stanza themes and topics, and metaphors took several months of application. Each transcript was re-transcribed focusing on five to seven smaller vignettes. In total 168 narrative vignettes, structured as poems, were constructed from the original 24 transcripts. Areas of talk surrounding key themes codified in the first round of transcriptions were now the focus of vignettes. These themes included: canonicity, reader and reader identity, ideological and pragmatic purposes of English, aesthetics, culture and ethics, democracy and innovation, language, text and communication. By framing the analysis in terms of theme, and with keen awareness of prosody, the inquiry sought to capture the ‘voice’ of the original narrator. However, inevitably when teachers were re-interviewed some no longer held the view they originally articulated as new experiences cast a different light on their reflections, or they became more comfortable teaching the new course. In this instance, vignettes were discarded. Those that remain can only be viewed as the narratives ‘true’ of the teachers’ experience during the time they were captured in.

In order to illustrate how the methodology worked, the process is outlined in the following text, beginning with a segment of a transcript from which a narrative vignette was isolated (Figure 5.1), and through poetic analysis, its thematic and metaphorical significance revealed (Figure 5.2). Later, this same vignette underwent critical discourse analysis (see Figure 5.3). The first
methodological step was to read through the transcript and identify vignettes that on the surface dealt with issues of textual practice. An example of an isolated vignette from an interview transcript with Kerrin is given over the page. The orientation to Kerrin’s account is an overview of texts and assessment, moving into the complication of student motivation and her own textual practice.

We looked at a timeline... First six weeks we’re working on ‘The Crucible’, so Area of Study Two this year and into language analysis, then we’ll move into text analysis, then well do some revision on those and a practice exam and then we’ll start Semester Two, and we’ll go back to Area of Study Two. One of the reasons we do that is because we also have a very tight SAC policy and prep task policy so students are required to complete tasks. One of the problems we have - and again part of it is socioeconomic - a lack of kids reading the books. So the preparatory tasks are designed so that they have to read the book... which they have to do and submit on time otherwise they can’t sit the SAC, which impacts on their ability to actually gain a Study Score. It’s kind of a carrot and stick approach but there is a feeling amongst kids that if they buy ‘Insight’ or ‘Sparknotes’ and read those they should be able to get away with not reading the text and it destroys the richness of understanding they get...I mean they can do it – they don’t do very well, but it can be done...

I am actually more open to different approaches and to having a go at different things. At the same time I’m terrified that I’m going to stuff up their Year Twelve. Some of my colleagues may have been teaching for ten, twelve, fifteen years in V.C.E. English, in some ways that actually restricts their... acceptance of any change and to me curriculum is an evolving thing and society is evolving all the time, and we have to evolve in the schools to keep pace, in fact we don’t keep pace we play catch up – ‘Oh my God this is happening we better do something to help kids cope with it sort of thing’. The Grads are pretty good at this too even though they’ve only done V.C.E. like five years ago, they’re more open to trying new things and trying new approaches because I think when you’ve been teaching V.C.E. or studying for a long time you can get into the mindset of ‘well this is what I’ve always done and its worked okay in the past therefore I don’t need to change’ and to me that doesn’t serve the needs of the kids enough. I suppose it also gives me that sense that I’m a bit of a fraud so I need to be really, really, informed and really aware and really attuned to what’s going on because it is Year 12 and it is important you know and if I’m not doing the right thing and if I’m not giving and helping these kids to develop the skills they need then I am failing them and that’s not right.

Figure 5.1: Narrative Vignette: Segment of a vignette taken from a transcription of an interview.
Although Kerrin’s account has an orientation and a set of complications, this vignette like many others identified, does not readily adhere to narrative conventions. There is a spontaneity in speech, which results in topic shifts and loops and in many instances, no resolutions to the stories teachers tell. Reading through the vignettes, I was already aware that narrative analysis was not enabling me to get at the heart of their concerns. Poetic analysis, attending to prosodic patterns and figurative language, elicited the subtle connections and meanings between topic shifts. The vignette above is transformed in new ways; moments where teachers speak with passion and emotion, lower tone, speak fast and slow down are denoted by new lines, much like finding the rhythm and rhyme of a poem. Topic shifts become new stanzas and the figurative language and/or changes in perspective reveal the subtle connections linking one idea conceptually to the next. The way the analysis was done, is given below, showing how the poetic analysis of meta-narratives works (see Figure 5.2), again using the same vignette: Kerrin’s reflection (from Figure 5.1) on how she prepared for teaching the new V.C.E. English course.

| Stanza 8 – Novice V.C.E. teacher coming to know |
|---|---|
| 72 | What I think was really good though *(refer line 1)* |
| 73 | was it meant I didn’t have many history, |
| 74 | preconceived ideas |
| 75 | I am actually more open to different approaches |
| 76 | at the same time terrified *(link to ‘fraud’ motif)* |
| 77 | that I’m going to stuff up their Year Twelve |

| Stanza 9 – Experienced teachers not knowing |
|---|---|
| 78 | so where some of my colleagues may have been teaching |
| 79 | for ten, twelve, fifteen years in V.C.E. English |
| 80 | in some ways that actually restricts |
| 81 | their willingness, or their acceptance of any change |

| Stanza 10 – Ideal way of knowing vs. reality |
|---|---|
| 82 | and to me curriculum is an evolving thing |
| 83 | and society is evolving all the time *(social contexts)* |
| 84 | and we have to evolve in the schools to keep pace, *(poetic repetition)* |
| 85 | in fact we don’t keep pace we play catch up *(metaphor)* |

Figure 5.2: Poetic Analysis: Segment of the vignette (from Figure 5.1), divided into stanzas, attending to issues of prosody, metaphor and themes.
Initially this section of talk (see Figure 5.1) seemed to focus on the anxieties of teacher experience. However, through poetic analysis, a process of reducing the text to stanzas through emphasis on prosodic features, the core theme emerged. This is a meta-narrative about knowledge or ways of knowing valued in V.C.E. English. By treating Kerrin’s narrative as a performance or storied account of experience, the social context is foregrounded. Poetic analysis reveals recurring motifs in teachers’ reflections, evident in the one about the legitimacy of professional knowledge, which Kerrin evokes through the repetition of ‘fraud’. Furthermore, poetic analysis identifies the significant metaphors that frame teachers’ personal accounts of practice, and sometimes the social conditions in which these are situated. Again this can be seen in references to playing “catch up” in Kerrin’s extract. Many of the teachers described V.C.E. English as a ‘race’, foregrounding the frenetic demands of working within a mandated Study design, whilst trying to meet society’s increasing demands on communication and technology. Poetic analysis provided an analytical instrument for understanding the doing of practice, and more importantly the undergoing of this experience. For example, this extract with Kerrin reveals the ways in which the teacher is an active agent in negotiating curriculum and interacting with others, as she developed her identity as a V.C.E. English teacher. By organising the text into stanzas what often seemed to be digressions from topics actually illuminated the emotional, intellectual and relational aspects of knowing and identity integral to understanding teachers’ experiences. This was particularly true of the stretches of talk devoted to the passions and tensions of literary practice. The analysis revealed the subtle subjectivities and overt themes, which teachers articulate in storying their experiences.

The value of adapting a performance model of Gee’s poetic analysis was particularly suited to elucidating the personal meaning of teachers’ narratives, drawing attention to how an individual feels, and intuitively knows the world. However, whilst the performatively analysis elucidated the significant metaphors and themes of experience, it did not attend to the sociological dimensions of the context in which stories are told. Frost (2009) argues this view, suggesting that Gee’s model alone does not suffice in helping another understand the embedded discourse at work in interaction, a concern that resonated with the dilemmas I faced as a researcher. Differentiating between a view of language as discourse and of narrative became increasingly difficult. As a researcher having isolated the narratives, and understood how teachers individually tell their stories, I needed to find a way of making sense of these against the ideological contexts many assumed were obvious. I began with the poetic model of analysis, described here, thinking about issues of identity, culture and practice in tracing metaphors and themes. Later I turned to Critical Discourse Analysis, thinking about the ideological nature of language, literature and English, and inevitably teachers’ perspectives on these.
5.3.2 Employing Discourse Analysis

Critical approaches to discourse analysis are fundamental to working with teachers’ discursive constructions of practice, ideologically positioning these within wider historical and political debates in English education. Discourse analysis is based on the premise that language is an inter-dependent social construction. The early discourse analysts accepted a construct similar to Hymes’s (1972) in which language is a signifier of social cohesion. Hymes argued that language is part of social behaviour; we enter into shared language practices as part of a group and often our success in the group depends on our ability to use language to be understood. However, critical discourse approaches extend this idea of sociality, working on the premise that language is a meaningful signifier of human subjectivities, inclusive of powers relations, which is of central concern to this study. I sought an approach to analysis that would take the deconstruction of meaning, bringing together the micro, meso and macro levels of meaning. Thompson’s (2002) description articulates this emphasis:

A critical approach to discourse seeks to link the text (micro level) with the underlying power structures in society (macro sociocultural practice level) through discursive practices upon which the text was drawn (meso level). (Thompson, 2002, cited McGregor, 2003, p. 3)

These critical approaches provided a basis for explaining teachers’ subjectivities against a broader set of historical, social and political understandings. The critical turn in this study partially emerged from the limitations of working with narrative as a form of social discourse. Van Dijk’s (2001) view of discourse provided a theoretical framework to initially bridge the gap between micro and macro approaches to discourse, where micro denotes “language use, discourse, verbal interaction and communication” and macro level analysis as “power, dominance and inequality between social groups” (p. 345). Through treating the texts as a unique form of narrative discourse, I was drawn to Van Dijk’s four theoretical frames of analysis:

1. Member Groups: Discourse as pertaining to members of social groups, organizations, and institutions.
3. Context – Social structure: Discursive interaction as constitutive of social structure in local and global structures.
4. Personal and Social cognition: Language users as social actors who have personal and social cognition influencing interaction and discourse (Van Dijk, 2001).

Van Dijk’s frames complemented the poetic analysis, acknowledging the performative functions of discourse and the contexts informing their construction. This supported a view of teachers as agentic storytellers, which is central to this narrative inquiry. To see their views of English as personally and socially constructed through language is reliant on forging connections between the micro, macro and meso, or the etic and emic perspectives. The original transcripts, for the first round of interviews only, were re-coded to reflect Van Dijk’s frames. Particular attention was given to teachers’ depictions of their profession at large and of their smaller regional, school and classroom communities. Teachers were viewed as social actors performing or enacting a viewpoint. Whilst poetic analysis enabled me to describe the features of narrative discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis enabled me to explain them in terms of their underlying social structures and communicative function. There was intentionality on my part as researcher, providing prompts around English teaching and literature that influenced topic shifts and topic control. The teachers’ replies reflected their understandings of English as the ‘commonplace’, influenced by their professional roles as teachers and their social roles as readers, and for some, their involvement in the Assessors community. Van Dijk’s model, although I did not fully attend to the lens of social cognition, illuminated how constructions of English are ideological; enacting, confirming, reproducing and challenging relations of power that are significant to issues of canonicity, culture, education, identity and citizenship. This impacted on how I would eventually re-read the narrative vignettes I worked with, as well as the separate discourse extracts elicited in the third layer of re-transcription and analysis. Originally the discussion chapters were to be divided between narrative and discourse sections, however, it became disingenuous to try and separate the two. Tamboukou (2008), in her account of the narrated subject argues that narration is a political, social and relational act in which there is “not a unitary core self, but rather a system of selves grappling with differences and taking up subject positions” (p. 288). In grappling with the idea of subject positions, Critical Discourse Analysis (C.D.A.) united the emic and the etic in ways that gave meaning to each individual’s account and the collective concerns across these.

After the second round of interviews had been transcribed and undergone poetic narrative analysis, these same vignettes were subject to Critical Discourse Analysis. The interview was conducted in an open style, in which teachers dominated turn taking, introduced topics and often topic looped to earlier statements (including to the first interview). Again Van Dijk’s frames were used to make sense of the relationship between interlocutors, the social nature of the interaction and structures underpinning the discourse. However, I was beginning as a
researcher to take a more critical turn, recognising the ideological threads that seemed to connect teachers’ reflections, and the tensions and aspirations implicit in these. Principles of C.D.A. based on the work of Fairclough (1989) and Gee (1990) became central to the study’s methodology. Application of Fairclough’s techniques, derived from sociolinguistics, complemented the sociological, ethnographic approach of the second interview, enabling an analysis of how language is used to establish relationships and maintain social cohesion. Fairclough (1989) presents an account of discursive practice in which linguistic choices reflect social phenomena and are part of social phenomena itself. The narrative vignettes, in addition to selected discourse extracts, were analysed in terms of how language is used to represent constructions of reality. As researcher, I overtly looked for interdependent meanings; how discourses represent ways of knowing and enacting ideological and social roles within communities. The approach to analysis was broken down into three stages, utilising the three dimensions of Fairclough’s approach, which Janks (1997) identifies as:

1. Text analysis (description).
2. Processing analysis (interpretation).
3. Social analysis (explanation).

The first entry point to the transcripts was a systematic analysis of choices and patterns in teachers’ vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure. Having codified the transcripts, the second level of analysis focused on linking the field texts to their social contexts. Focusing on the interview as a speech act, attention was paid to discourse features, particularly emphasising how coherence is achieved. The third entry point for analysis was a broader consideration of the ideological processes informing the discourse as a kind of social practice (Blommaert, 2005). In this third reading I traced the thematic patterns across the transcripts, noting the metaphors, similes and imagery teachers used to construct their view of the profession. Adapting Fairclough’s conceptualisation of discourse illuminated the social and ideological dimensions of their perspectives, which narrative analysis was limited in defining. However, in the process of ‘writing up’ the analysis, there remained a void. Teachers addressed issues of globalisation, democracy and citizenship, which are inherently political ideas. The researcher needed to account for the ways teachers entered into these debates. This was particularly true of the third interviews in which teachers addressed issues of historical change and future evolution of English.

Gee’s (1990) conceptualisation of Critical Discourse Analysis added another dimension to understanding how individuals construct their identity beyond the immediate social context to the wider political one. In narrating stories of their landscapes, experiences and beliefs, teachers
adopted ideological positions (consciously and subconsciously), influenced by more than the immediate social context in which the speech act occurred. This is further compounded by their awareness of audience and their ability/ inability to share meaning. Teachers articulated, resisted, and asserted ideas about experience, embodied in the form of personal and socially mediated discourses and wider institutional Discourses about democracy, assessment regimes, ethics and citizenship (Gee, 1990). While the study avoids fully implementing Gee’s approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, C.D.A. provides a tool for looking beyond the surface level of the transcript. Narrative analysis of re-current themes, whilst important in highlighting what teachers value (and devalue) in their communities of practice, do not allow us to understand how teachers come to such positions or the implications of these. Gee (2004) argues that:

Language-in-use is always part and parcel of, and partially constitutive of, specific social practices and that social practices have implications for inherently political things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power. (p. 33)

Gee’s perspective on discourse/Discourse was pertinent to analysis, identifying the teacher as an active agent or constituent in responding, interpreting and deciding what English is and how it is practiced as a form of social cohesion. The teacher’s construction of English and literature is historically, socially, and ideologically informed by these discourses. Mapping discourses/Discourses therefore, became an integral part of the analysis as a means of understanding the socio-political dimensions of teachers’ subjectivities.

The third series of transcripts calls on the Critical Discourse approach to ideas, within individual transcripts and later across teachers’ transcripts. The doing of critical discourse constituted attending to linguistic signifiers, pragmatic signs, and the structural form of the interview texts, linking these to an understanding of the ideational functions of them. The use of metaphor, as a critical device and narrative one, ‘metaphors we live by’, was treated as particularly pertinent as representations of socio-cultural and ideological ideas. I viewed the transcripts as living field texts, guided by Fairclough’s principles, transcribing segments of these with attention to textual language (descriptive), relational context of production (interpretation) and the broader socio-cultural, political and ideological meanings (explanation). However, my entry point differed with each extract and usually began with an intuitive feel of something in the text working upon me – an irony for the narrative inquirer, seeking to critically inquire. Once extracts had been selected and removed from the transcript for further analysis, these were later mapped according to the ideological discourses/Discourses framing these. This was achieved through a rather unsophisticated approach of photocopying individual extracts and pasting these onto A3 sheets under discourse headings so thematic patterns, metaphors and discursive techniques informing these were more readily apparent. Critical Discourse Analysis
often brought to light new meaning in existing narrative vignettes. This can be seen by comparing Kerrin’s original vignette (see Figure 5.1.) and later poetic analysis (see Figure 5.2), to its subsequent re-analysis through C.D.A. (see Figure 5.3.). Kerrin’s vignette, originally identified as part of narrative analysis, depicts the ways of knowing about English practice and literature valued by Kerrin. As can be seen in Figure 5.3. when the same vignette was subjected to C.D.A., key discourses related to social class and assessment, and the pressures these create emerged. These key concerns are indicated through words and phrases highlighted in bold.

| 1. One of the **problems we have**   | 10. And if destroys the richness of understanding they get. |
| 2. and again part of it **is socioeconomic; lack of kids reading the books.** | 11. I think I am actually more open to different approaches, |
| 3. So the preparatory tasks are designed so that they have to read the book | 12. and to **having a go at different things;** |
| 4. in order to do the preparatory task, which they have to do and submit on | 13. at the same time **terrified that I’m going to stuff up** their Year Twelve. |
| 5. time otherwise they can’t sit the SAC, which impacts on | 14. So where some of my colleagues may have been teaching for ten, twelve, fifteen years |
| 6. their ability to actually gain a Study Score. | 15. in V.C.E. English in some ways that actually restricts their, willingness, |
| 7. It’s kind of a carrot and stick approach but there is a feeling amongst kids | 16. or their acceptance of any change, and to me |
| 8. that if they buy ‘Insight’ or ‘Sparknotes,’ | 17. curriculum is an evolving thing and society is evolving all the time. |
| 9. and read those they should be able to get away with not reading the text. | 18. And we have to evolve in the schools to keep pace, |
| 10. And if destroys the richness of understanding they get. | 19. in fact we don’t keep pace we play catch up. |

Figure 5.3: Critical Discourse Analysis: C.D.A. of vignette (from Figure 5.1).

Critical Discourse Analysis elucidates the relationship between the practices teachers describe, how they see themselves, and the broader ideological debates informing their perspectives. Rather than remaining a personal account of knowing, centred on Kerrin’s ideals and fears, C.D.A. enables her concerns here to be seen as part of her broader social and political view of the tensions around literary practice. In the above extract, C.D.A. highlights the problematic discourses of literacy and poverty underlying Kerrin’s perceptions. Imagery of students’ resistance is presented in metaphors of teaching through a “kind of a carrot and stick approach. Discourses of assessment regimes as subverting pleasure and passion emerge in “destroying the
This discourse then connects to another one about school success and failure and the overarching power of assessment regimes. The consequences of not completing SACs are reduced down to its impact on their ability to actually gain a Study Score. Kerrin also defines her professional identity in terms of this same discourse. Kerrin’s responsibility to up-skill her students, by doing ‘right’ by them, is attached to her own sense of potential failure, “I am failing them and that’s not right.”

It is the combined approach to narrative and discourse that enables a fuller elucidation of the joys, and tensions of the ‘commonplace’. Whilst practising self-reflexivity is required to ensure the discourses we attend to, as a researcher, are those that arise from the performance and not solely our theoretical frames, bravely joining the two ultimately yields greater understanding. The two distinct approaches to transcription and analysis yield different perspectives. One is embedded in stories about being in the world in an immediate social and relational way. The other is embodied in discourses that are about being of the world in ideological ways. From these narratives and discourse extracts, vignettes are composed which offer more than one interpretation of the teachers’ experiences and knowledge, creating a bricolage of English teaching, sewn with multiple threads. In order to authentically represent teachers’ voices, I united these two forms of analysis. The poetic analysis brought a depth of understanding to the narrative function of their reflections: the themes and metaphors pertinent to how they story and represent their experience. The critical discourse analysis allowed me to simultaneously contextualise their personal recounts in terms of the socio-political contexts that underpin their significance. Ultimately, the combination of these methodologies rather than coming into conflict allow for an integrated, organic insight into how the teachers discursively construct representations of literary English and its personal value to them.

5.4 SUMMARY

Chapter Five presented an overview of the approach to interviewing and analysis embodied in the research. The chapter outlined the questions, prompts and approach to interviewing undertaken, combining narrative and ethnographic methods to elicit personal and social stories of literature and its relationship to English practice. Furthermore, the chapter explored the main stages of analysis: firstly, narrative treatment of the transcripts through poetic analysis, and secondly critical approaches to these through discourse analysis. This is essential in framing Chapters Six to Nine, which combine the findings of the analysis, presented in the form of key themes, discourses and ways of knowing. Chapter Four introduced the teachers; Chapter Five introduced their stories and approaches used to analyse these, respecting the need to work sensitively with teachers’ disclosures. Understanding something about the teachers’ identity is important, as their ideas inform the discussion chapters that follow this one. The teachers’ often passionate assertions about what English in Victoria should be, in light of local, national and
global developments, reflect their active engagement in the profession and the debates within it. As described in this chapter, some of the teachers interviewed are current or prior assessors of V.C.E. and H.S.C English, many are involved in Professional Development and their subject association, three are Teacher Librarians and most teach English in the middle years. Their views on critical debates about language and literature, with the exception of Norah and Ella, are located within “extensive experience”, “common sense know-how”, and “knowledge from being around the traps for a long time”. Experience is valued as a way of knowing what English is about. Chapter Six, the first of the discussion chapters, particularly emphasises how teachers view their experience of V.C.E. English: its literary traditions and new purposeful practices.
CHAPTER SIX

LITERARY AND NON-LITERARY CONSTRUCTIONS OF ENGLISH

6.0 INTRODUCTION

Teachers’ discussion of literary texts and traditions is a poignant springboard for diving into how teachers think about English, particularly its subjectivities and possibilities. There is a sacredness embedded in their storied accounts of English, evident in how some of the teachers describe their relationship to a subject that is “something I love”, “I deeply value being part of”, “and truly believe makes a difference in the world”. In the early days of my research, I had intended to focus on the narratological, weary of trespassing on a perceived sacredness of the teachers’ stories. To move toward the discursive though was a natural progression for inquiry. There is always a concern for the narrative inquirer that discourse is essentially about relations of power, and the researcher violates her position when she moves toward evaluation of the stories she is told. However, to treat the teachers who imparted their perspectives here as simply truth-tellers limits the scope of what we might learn through interviewing them. Language, communication and texts are ideological. Likewise, teachers’ interpretations of their work and their interaction with their students is relational. The ideological and the relational aspects of English teaching warrant the researcher’s interest. The two perspectives together, the narratological and discursive, create a portrait of how teachers shape, and in turn are shaped by, textual constructions of the V.C.E. English subject.

Chapter Six focuses on the findings related to the research questions: is literature still seen to be part of 21st century English practice? How do teachers’ perspectives on English, and its purpose position literature alongside other textual practices? The research set out to explore how teachers construct literary versions of English in a subject that is significantly centred on the study of texts. The phrase ‘textual constructions’ is used throughout this chapter to highlight the key finding of this discussion. Teachers construct literary and non-literary depictions of English; however, what unifies these is a concern with texts and textuality. Whilst teachers discursively construct literary representations of V.C.E. English, how they perceive these are tied to complex and diverse understandings of literature, society, culture, language and identity. Furthermore, while literary constructions are significant, these teachers see English in much more demanding ways as social media, technology and globalization reframe the work they do. English studies in this sense have the possibility to be configured in multiple ways (Misson, 2012). Before exploring the literary dimensions of English, this chapter begins with the non-literary constructions some teachers valued as equally significant to literary ones, in an age where communication and negotiation of ideas is perceived as paramount.
In its entirety the chapter reinforces what the rationale established; that V.C.E. English, like English subjects elsewhere, is situated in an historically contested space, reflected in the ways the teachers involved in this Study invariably speak about V.C.E. English and its higher purposes and aims. An important sub-question in this research considered how teachers’ reflections on their practices are discursively shaped by historical discourses if English and literary schools of thought. Teachers talk about English in ways that are empowering and aspirational, historically situated and forward looking. English is described as “the eternal equalizer”, “the corner brick”, “a foundation stone” and “a grand old dame of education”, which has existed across education systems and its “myriad of changes”. These heritage motifs are matched by views of its future progress and relevance, embodied in references to English as having “its finger on the pulse”, being “part of an international professional dialogue”, “connected, intraconnected and interconnected wherever it is”, “channelling the future”, and “ahead of the game”. There is a recognition underpinning teachers’ reflections that English takes many shapes and forms. Often V.C.E. English is recognised as a subject quite distinct from English in other places in Australia and overseas. Sometimes, however, teachers’ views of V.C.E. English are fused with a general understanding of what they see as the commonalities underpinning English subjects across the globe. English, in general terms, is seen as “a subject with integrity”, “governed by principles”, and “seeking authenticity”. V.C.E. English is likewise described in similar terms as “quite authentic”, “a pretty good compass” and providing “a leading edge”. These teachers, however, are aware of the challenges that frame their understanding of English, from the micro level of their individual classroom practice to the big picture of English as a profession. Metaphors of “straddling change”, and “bridging divides” are juxtaposed to “holding the reins” and “stemming the tide” as they navigate what English is, what it has been, and what it might contribute to future generations.

6.1 NON LITERARY CONSTRUCTIONS OF ENGLISH

Romantic views of English as a quest for enlightenment are evident in teachers’ motifs of discovery: teachers and students as “sojourners”, embarking on a “journey” of “imaginative flight” toward “finding that something which connects with them”. This thematic pattern of discovery and “world opening” experience, however, is bound to concrete pragmatic aims teachers recognise as “essentially the job you have to do”. English, as a microcosm of ‘real world’ thinking, reading and responding is depicted as a site where the contestation of “everyday realities” impinges on the otherwise endless creative potential of a subject “with boundless territories” and “big landscapes of ideas”. There is a reality that underpins the work these teachers do, which is defined by the parameters of the Study Design and the Outcomes students must competently demonstrate. The “official curriculum”, “the master plan in the Study Design” guides teachers’ approach to V.C.E. English and how they view its possibilities.
and constraints. While Joy, Ella and Norah use metaphors that suggest they feel constricted by the Study Design, evident in repetition of being “tied”, “bound”, and “weighed down” by the amount of content to cover and skills to be taught, others including Kerrin and Mary recognise this as a “double edged sword”, and a “necessary compass”. Creating a common focus is part of an egalitarian discourse evident throughout teachers’ reflections. English is ideologically perceived as an equitable landscape open to “all comers”, “every swan and every lame duck” and “not elitist, after all that’s what Lit. [the subject named V.C.E. Literature] is for”. The egalitarian ideal, however, is undermined by the parameters surrounding content and assessment. The Study Design, despite creating a “level playing field” and “setting the game rules” can sometimes conflict with the teachers’ desire to explore ideas in ways that are unique to their cohorts or allow for alternative assessments. This is evident in many teachers’ accounts, but emphasised on several occasions by Grace, expressed in her sentiment that “what I like about teaching English is the ability to grapple with the real world … I don’t always agree with the ways we have to do it but that’s it – you work within the Study Design”.

Genuine skill development is portrayed as endangered and threatened by the pressures schools are under to “churn out results”, “number crunch” and “value add”. A symptom of this culture is a narrow focus on discrete skills and content-driven learning, which Mary, Grace and Kerrin saw as limiting students’ future innovative potential. Images of students as “critical thinkers”, “explorers” and “authors” are expressed as the ideals English should promote. Simplistic constructions of learners as “soaking sponges” and “passive lambs” are emblematic of the external forces some teachers fear will impede “knowledge based learning” and “opportunities for growth”. Ideologically the desire to create an egalitarian context in which student diversity is catered for, is undermined by the feelings of being oppressed or controlled by media, assessment panels and governments: “those edupreneurs”, “the powers that be”, and “the bureaucrats”. Teaching a compulsory English subject (unless students have elected to study ‘English Language’ or ‘Literature’) under conditions and expectations that limit teacher autonomy is “ultimately wrong”, “pretty dehumanizing” and “a sad reality”. Kerrin’s reflection demonstrates this recurring theme:

“Whether we like it or not V.C.E.’s primary function is for kids to gain an Enter [V.C.E. Score] to go to university so the emphasis is on academics… we were teaching to the exam, you know developing in the kids the skills that they needed to be able to do in that three hour time slot… whether we like it or not the performance of a school is assessed on their study scores and their Enters and the number of them that go on to university. Now personally, I think that’s wrong because when you have a look at the data from a school like ours… I think the majority of those are not interested in university.”
Kerrin’s school community differs significantly to that of the other teachers in the study. Located in a rural area, and reliant on trades and local industry, she valorises English for the opportunities it gives students to “broaden their horizons”, whilst also practically up-skilling them for alternative vocational pathways. Kerrin’s comments on her students’ literacy needs frequently foreshadow her emphasis on practical language skills. As a Year 12 Coordinator she sees many students entering V.C.E. English “whose writing skills and reading skills and communication skills are not where they should be. Even basic fundamentals like spelling, grammar and punctuation and those sort of things.” Kerrin attributes what she portrays as her students’ deficit literacy skills in part to their socioeconomic environment; “they’re kids... whose families don’t appreciate education, therefore, perhaps don’t have the flow on respect for learning”. The divide between the school’s desired outcomes and social expectations is evidently a source of conflict for Kerrin. Kerrin discursively locates the pragmatic purpose of English within a greater view of V.C.E.’s aims: “whether we like it or not V.C.E.’s primary function is for kids to gain an Enter [score] to go to university so the emphasis is on academics”. This image resonates across all of the teachers’ perceptions of V.C.E. English as inevitably driven by “a top down approach to assessment”, that must concern itself with “nuts and bolts”, and making sure students can “pass the exam”, or in Kerrin’s words, develop the skills they need “to be able to do in that three hour time slot”. However, Kerrin like other teachers in this study, positions herself in opposition to the politics of school performance. Her comment, “Now personally, I think that’s wrong because when you have a look at the data from a school like ours... I think the majority of those are not interested in university” emphasises the bias in how lower socio-demographic schools are represented. Her view of what English should entail as a practical and theoretical subject is shaped by a moral sense of duty toward enriching students’ understanding of language. Penalising schools based on data compromises the broader aims of English, which practical skills are part of, but also not limited by. Kerrin, like others in the study, argues for a broader theoretical vision of English, one committed to “fostering that ability for abstract thinking and making links between debates and discussions and conflicts that we’ve had in the past ... and seeing the potential that has to shape our future as well”.

Developing students’ text and language skills, whilst balancing ethical aims, is impacted by the limited time and opportunity teachers feel they have to cover content. Labour intensive metaphors of “tunnelling through texts and essays”, “digging through books”, “drowning in work” and “pushing carts up-hill” pervade teachers’ recounts. A genuine emphasis on conceptual and language-based skills that enable students to pursue pathways that “ignite their personal passion”, “lead them along the right track”, and “get them where they want to go” is valorised in a subject traditionally focused on literacy. Several of the teachers told ‘success’ stories of former students who pursued their desired pathways because of the skills they learned in English. Stories about “the high flyers” and “over achievers” studying arts, law, medicine,
politics and science occur frequently in teacher tales, set against those “equally impressive”, and “just as important” success stories of lower achievers. Described as Aesop’s “optimistic tortoise”, “slow and steady snails” and “the under dog”, those students who steadily improved in reading and response, became “substantial thinkers”, “much sharper”, “liberated from the scourge” and “clearly more confident”. These stories, embedded in egalitarian discourses about social empowerment and emancipation again highlight the transformative appeal of English. Improving students’ conceptual, textual and linguistic skills is framed as the catalyst for further life-changing experiences. This theme is particularly evident in Joy’s narrative:

I think it is even more true in Year 12, you see them at the start of the year... and you see what they are capable of, for example, their essay writing, and you just think ‘Oh my God’... you think this is going to be a hard year (laughter) and... by the end of the year you see the final piece of work that you are going to mark for them and you can... see progress on those pages in front of you, you can see a kid who has gone from perhaps not writing in proper sentences, or in fluent sentences, with a very limited vocabulary, to someone who... it is happening, its flowing... they are expressing themselves much more fluently, there is a greater degree of sophistication in the language they employ in the construction of their sentences and I think that all that basic stuff is actually really important.

Joy’s reflection highlights a recurring pattern in many of the teachers’ descriptions of English. Often narrated in evangelical styles, these ‘miracle’ stories told by Mary, Joy, Grace, Norah and Mark testify to the transformative power of English. V.C.E. English is portrayed as a subject in which students are the “apprentices”, “hungry caterpillars”, and “sleeping giants... who suddenly wake up”, and realise they can understand, engage with, and articulate ideas. Mary, a teacher-librarian in a Melbourne government school captures this recurring sentiment in her assertion that students realise “you can participate in this world, you can understand it, and you are part of the vocabulary and ideas of it”. The teaching and development of practical language, literacy and textual skills is part of a theoretical view of English as a subject, which can realistically make a difference in young people’s lives. Joy’s account is a celebration of senior English and what her students achieve. Her emphatic claim in a later interview, “you can actually make a difference to a child and their ability to do things at least in an academic sense”, is evident in other teachers ‘building’ metaphors of skills as “first stepping stones”, “basic building blocks for life-long learning”, needed to “climb the ladder... to become an adult”. The students who struggle to refine their literacy skills yet persevere in English are portrayed as achieving a measure of success, despite the higher standard other students do in fact achieve. Joy’s declarative, “they were not ever going to be prize winners, but they did complete their V.C.E.” is a valid achievement when juxtaposed to the more dire predictions she
presupposes “on the face of what you saw in the early years, you would have thought they wouldn’t make it”.

Joy’s ‘miracle’ tale, like others in the study is underpinned by a grim humour or recognition of the challenges inherent to English teaching. References to “rowing up river”, “climbing Everest”, “sailing a slow boat to China”, are akin to Joy’s “Oh my God... you think this is going to be a hard year”. Often these humorous remarks are an orientation to teachers’ tales in which students’ gradual progression through reading, writing and language-based Outcomes is an unravelling path of labour and success until “by the end of the year you see the final piece of work and ... you can see progress on those pages in front of you”. Witnessing their students achieve greater control of written expression and shaping of ideas is a “wonder”, “the turning point”, “the mountaintop”, and the “summit”. In Joy’s depiction the “kid who has gone from perhaps not writing in proper sentences, or in fluent sentences, with a very limited vocabulary” is transformed into a literate individual who can express themselves with “a greater degree of sophistication in the language they employ in the construction of their sentences”. Joy’s advocacy that English should concern itself with fundamental skills, the “basic stuff” is actually a more complex statement embedded across the teachers’ accounts. For students who have a literary talent or “a grasp of language and self-expression”, mastering the “basic stuff” is not enough. English in general, and as a senior school subject in Victoria, at its highest peak, is valorised because its practical skills: “tools for comprehending the world” and its “structures for responding” assists many students to “open new windows”, “create new jobs and industries”, and “converse with the world”.

6.1.1 English as language and communication

Teachers’ perceptions of V.C.E. English are discursively embedded in their personal and social valuing of a subject described in terms of its richness. English is described as a site “alive with rich possibilities”, a subject with a “wealth of ideas” and “a plethora of opportunities” to interact with others. The ‘richness’ of the ideas and practices embodied in a study of texts, media and persuasive language is articulated as “part and parcel”, “the general business” and “the classic niche” of a subject with a strong communication focus. A recurring theme in the teachers’ reflections is the interdependent relationship between language and communication. Understanding how language works, particularly in persuasive modes, is a fundamental purpose of English. The capacity to use language in a purposeful and meaningful way to communicate, and at a higher level, to persuade others, stems from understanding “the tools of persuasion”, “the language of rhetoric” and “the power of words in everyday situations”. A global democratic discourse particularly frames six of the teachers’ affirmations of why language “fuels the momentum” and “drives the power” of English in Victoria and elsewhere. The teachers’ ideological beliefs that English should promote opportunities for life-long learning,
and encourage young people to be active global citizens are dependent on them being “proficient language users”, “able to adopt some kind of universal literacy”, and “communicate with all comers”. Some of these ideas are particularly pertinent in Kerrin’s reflection: Her overall appraisal of a language-based focus is embedded in a broader appreciation of the technological changes she sees as rapidly shaping global democratic society.

The speed of communication is such that we need to be skilling our kids in being able to cope with and manage that and I think that that’s... part of the underlying philosophy and I think recognition of a range of different perspectives, contexts, cultural elements, if kids have a greater understanding of that it is going to enable them to better cope in that global community that we all seem to be moving into living with.

In Kerrin’s response there is a keen awareness of the global community as immediately accessible through technology. Metaphors of the world “at their fingertips”, “knocking at the door” and “at the edge of their vision” frequently occur in teachers’ depictions of globalism. A view of civic identity, as fluid and evolving, is evident in these metaphors and Kerrin’s depiction of a global community as one we “all seem to be moving into living with”. The English teacher’s agency in developing students’ global civic identity is two fold. English teachers have a responsibility to develop their students’ communication skills. Furthermore, these skills should result in deeper cultural appreciation and “ethical sensibilities”. Kerrin’s view that the “speed of communication” necessitates examining cultural ideas, contexts and viewpoints is a common theme in responses. Metaphors of ‘opening’: “opening up Pandora’s box”, “opening the lines of communication”, “opening their [students’] eyes and ears”, reflect how English teaching is being shaped by these emerging challenges to contemporary practice (Singh & Han, 2006). Ensuring young people can, in Kerrin’s words “cope with and manage” the demands of language and communication, underpins several of the teachers’ broader philosophical understandings of what a senior English subject should aspire to achieve. Kerrin’s particular valorisation of these skills is heightened by her own strengths as an English teacher: “I'm constantly developing my understanding of language and how language is an important tool in our everyday life”.

Developing students’ communication skills is aligned, in all of the teachers’ accounts, with a deeper pedagogical purpose of creating literate citizens. Communication is essentially concerned with meaning-making, and more particularly with understanding how language is used, according to Kerrin, in a “host of different ways to communicate ideas, to share ideas, to promote thinking to challenge existing ideas, in a range of styles and forms”. Language is viewed as meaningful, not only because it represents knowledge, but more importantly because it represents the limitations and possibility of thought (Misson, 2004). Focusing on purpose,
context, audience and form are referred to by Ewan, Mark and Norah as “the foundations of communication”, “the first layer of the onion” and “basics of communication”. Furthermore, creating classroom communities where students can experiment with language and communicative forms is “a noble aim”, and a “necessary responsibility”. The English subject is only partially constructed in teacher talk as a literary study; textual study is accompanied, contested and challenged by differing ideas about language, communication and technologies. Language is depicted as the “source of all meaning” from which “all else proceeds”; it is “the river’s end”, “the absolute signifier of being human” and “the power through which we are understood”. From everyday communication, to social media, literature and other modes of communication, language underpins the teachers’ emphasis of what English should be about. Being conversant with the ideas of the world is a precursor to becoming empowered to “make themselves heard”, “represent themselves” and reach beyond their own communities. The accessibility of the world through technologies particularly social media is portrayed as a “forerunner” and “herald of change”, with online activities reshaping “how we live our lives offline”. Explicitly modelling, teaching, reading and responding through multimodal mediums and social media is a “new frontier” and “border crossing”, some of the teachers, especially Norah and Ella advocated “English must somehow address” or accept the “responsibility to reform”.

The contemporary need for students to be both users and producers of meaning is portrayed as challenging existing reading and language practices. Whilst a communication focus is described by some teachers as “endangering”, “encroaching on” and “challenging” literary and textual traditions, others also see it as “validating” and “adding substance” to V.C.E. English and how students respond to it. In four teachers’ accounts the impact of evolving technologies on language and communication is a positive challenge. Current and forthcoming generations of students are portrayed as inhabiting a “brave new world” and “a foreign landscape” in which interactive technologies create opportunities to stimulate students’ critical and creative thought processes. The importance of modelling communication for a “broadening global economy” is evident in the phrases teachers use: English is a “platform for communication”, “a territory built on words”, that is “aware of the shifting sands in social media and what’s online”. In other accounts, new communication modes and changes to Standard English are perceived as negatively impacting on how students read, write and respond to the world. Mary’s reflection displays a pattern that emerged across interviews, with teachers expressing their “terrible sense of fear”, acknowledging “the horse has already bolted” when it comes to “clear usage” and “language as one of mankind’s oldest art forms”.

I think one of the challenges is we have... a cohort of young people, and increasingly so, that live in a world of acronyms and text talk, who write like that...
and I think one of our challenges is that we do all the things in junior levels about grammar and expression and things like that but our kids don’t write like that and don’t talk like that for significantly more and more parts of their time... when we were kids you know, you had your slang in the yard but most of your exchanges were in general grammatical and expressive English, because people didn’t have to write CUL8R and LOL ... one of the greatest difficulties I have with students is getting them to realise that writing an essay for an exam is a formal context and they have to... forget that they know how to abbreviate or text talk or whatever, because they just do it so naturally. And we’re going to have kids in five years time when they hear see you... will in their heads see ‘C U’; they won’t see the words ‘see you’. How do you teach English then?

Mary’s response is embedded within a broader literacy debate concerned with the adverse effects of technology on students’ communication. A perceived correlation between students’ use of social media and a depreciation of students’ language skills, is a ‘truth’ many, particularly Mark, Joy, Ella and Mary use to argue as the basis of making English more language and media focused. Whilst Mary concedes it is important we create opportunities to connect with the language students use, “look there’s room for both” she uses the example of secretarial shorthand to highlight how social media and shifting language patterns threaten the future of English teaching. Whilst secretarial shorthand due to a defined purpose and context did not overtly change how people interacted “People didn’t talk in shorthand, they didn’t always write in shorthand neither”, social media is envisioned as having serious ramifications in the near future. In Mary’s view the concept of “kids in five years time when they hear ‘see you’... will in their heads see C U”, is connected to the bigger pedagogical question of “How do you teach English then?”

Focusing on discrete language skills in the middle years, “grammar and expression” is portrayed in Mary’s and others’ accounts in war-like terms as “a daily fight”, “a war against social media”, and “a losing battle”. Mary suggests this is a natural effect of her students’ experience as language users – “our kids don’t write like that and don’t talk like that for significantly more and more parts of their time”. Whilst language change is accepted as inevitable, five teachers view students’ use of non-standard English as impeding their ability to respond considerately to audience, purpose and context. The senior English teacher is seen by Mary as partly responsible for addressing the issue, “I think that’s one of the things we teach: audience awareness, format, forum and all those sorts of things”. The teachers share, to varying degrees, a belief that English (V.C.E. English, and English in general) should focus more on appropriate and acceptable language use. Whilst the current generation are seen as more readily communicating with others, some like Joy are concerned this does not “automatically translate
into solid or effective communication skills across the board”. These teachers critically distinguish between social networking and deeper communication skills, reducing the former to a more superficial experience they can do “very quickly and readily, with half a dozen other things happening at the same time”. Deep and purposeful communication is construed as a more powerful form of self-expression encompassing the ability to “really get to the heart of things” and articulate “your desires or your concerns outside those settings with other people”. Traditional approaches to texts, media, language and grammar are depicted as needing to be “revamped”, “overhauled” and “worked over”. This overhaul is a clearer focus between formal language and sustained composition skills alongside the use of emoticons, abbreviations and teenspeak in online blogs and other social media.

English is invariably portrayed as committed to helping students engage meaningfully with others, across genres and domains. Repetition of the term ‘proficiency’ in teachers’ recounts highlights the emphasis they place on language. Students need to be “proficient users of language”, “proficient in their mother tongue”, and “able to proficiently discern how they are being positioned”. A core element of proficiency is the ability to write clearly, however, in its “highest form” and “glowing achievement” it is linked to the art of rhetoric and persuasion. Joy’s utterance summarises the three main tenets underpinning the teachers’ reflections: “they should be able to express themselves clearly, forcefully [and] persuasively”. Central to teachers’ perceptions of V.C.E. English, and English in general, is a valuing of education, which partially resists neoliberalist discourses. This is embodied in teachers’ insistence that “we are not just producing kids for the workforce”, or “churning out workers” or “training sheep”. Although reinforcing functional literacy skills is important, there is a distinct valuing of language “for a higher purpose of expression and ideas”, which is not limited to the production of “simplistic”, “rudimentary” oral and written forms. The role of English in students’ language acquisition is particularly apparent in Ewan’s reflection:

To look at how language works – and for me if kids are really good they can look at the why language is used for that particular audience – you’re actually looking at very specific skills set which is well within their capacity and then what does that do? Well that then enables them to be both proficient language users, to be able to understand how it works and not to be victims, so you’re skilling them for later life as well as in an academic sense, so I would argue that's fundamental.

A study of language, which empowers students to critique and create their own texts, is esteemed by some as the “core of the apple” or the “epicentre” of English. Through focusing on language, and texts as a semiotic representation of ideas, teachers suggest English helps to “mature their ideas” and “ripen [students’] self-expression”, signified by “a greater degree of sophistication in the language they employ”. Ewan’s reflection, however, is more wary of
students’ capacities to evaluate language, as opposed to the other teachers who spoke about rhetoric, manipulation and persuasion in relatively unproblematic ways. Ewan positions himself within current debates about the role of language and cognition, and a past debate in the Victorian English profession that saw a move away from Clear Thinking in a previous H.S.C. English Study Design. Ewan’s view of evaluative language practices is problematic; whilst students can “look at HOW language works” only a minority “can look at THE WHY language is used for that particular audience”. However, like other teachers in the study, Ewan valorises a mastery of the English language as a fundamental purpose of English. Academically and socially empowering students for future life is an overarching theme in teachers’ reflections, evident too in Ewan’s juxtaposition of being “proficient language users” to an alternative of being “victims”.

6.1.2 English as ideas

English is depicted as a subject founded upon ideas that intellectually, emotionally and culturally contribute to an ethical, learned and articulate society. Heritage motifs frame ideas as “the wise thoughts gifted to us by our predecessors”, “a treasury of humankind” and “the story of who we are and where we’ve come from”. From an historical perspective, engaging with the ideas that have shaped humanity across time is part of “richness”, “wealth” and “abundance of opportunities” in English. From a contemporary perspective, whilst English is informed by a genealogy of past ideas, there is a pattern in teachers’ reflections, which frames English in terms of its future appeal. Socio-political, moral, environmental and humane ideas, described as “the fuel for innovation”, “the impetus of creative genius”, “the fabric of mankind”, drive a progressive view of English, embodying its “vision”, “promise” and “enduring hope”. There is a significant ethical discourse underlying many of the teachers’ perceptions that English is essentially about views and values, embodied in language and texts. Whilst teachers sometimes refer to knowledge as “core content” and “dominant ideas”, when discussing assessment, this is also depicted as an abstract term. Recurring references to “views and values”, “alternative perspectives” and “other viewpoints” depict knowledge as conceptual, open to interpretation of ideas. Instilling opportunities for students to explore their own, and others’ perspectives is fundamental to an ethical framework for English in Australia. Critically thinking and responding to the ideas and concerns in texts (including media and popular culture) is valorised as an ethical ‘measure’: “shaping a moral awareness”, “creating an ethical compass”, and “values barometer” for English practice.

Whilst teachers sometimes refer to knowledge as “core content” and “dominant ideas”, it is more frequently portrayed as an abstract term. Recurring references to “views and values”, “alternative perspectives”, and “other viewpoints” implies that knowledge is a socially mediated and conceptual understanding of ideas. Instilling opportunities for students to explore
their own, and others’ perspectives, is portrayed as integral to the relevance and sustainability of English subjects in Australia. English, as a subject embodying textual and language study, is seen as comfortably dealing with imagination and creativity and therefore, exploration of ideas.

English is perceived as a flexible site, shaped through interaction with the external world, evident in the ‘fluid’ motifs describing the “seeping through”, “trickling in” and “filtering down” of globalism and modernity. Students’ engagement with the external world is attained through examining alternative perspectives on a range issues. Issues of culture, society, identity, environment, science, ethics and politics feature prevalently in teachers’ reflections. English as a political and evolving subject is characterised as simultaneously “forward looking”, “outward looking” and “inward looking”.

There is an underlying theme in teachers’ reflections, which suggests English is, and should ideologically remain, a microcosm of society and the ideas that shape it. Metaphors of the ‘real world’ are a significant figure of speech in several teachers’ discussions of the external forces shaping English in Australia today. Reality is represented in images resonant of ‘The Lady of Shallot’ where there is “life outside the mirror”, and Platonic images of “life outside the cave”. Whilst many of these metaphors underpin literary constructions of English, they also reinforce media, language and issue based constructions. English is depicted as an ‘authentic’ and ‘real-world’ subject reinforced through teachers’ references to its “real-life practices”, “everyday texts from everyday life”, “real world needs”, and “authentic ideas”. This yearning for authenticity is evoked in Ella’s reflection on Creating and Presenting in the revised Study Design:

_I like the way it focuses on the ideas rather than the text and it seems to me... our focus is on a context and the ideas, and it teaches students to have their own ideas and to compare these to the ideas that are presented around them in the world and even though they still have to study one prescribed text, it seems to me it is very strongly recommended they study a range of other things... we get them to find lots themselves and that to me is a real, it’s a skill that kind of lends itself to a lifelong learning idea where they can leave school and independently... find connections between ideas._

There is a clear valuing of contextualised learning that fundamentally shapes Ella’s broad interpretation of the Study Design, recommending students “study of a range of other things”.

Ella, like other teachers interviewed, is complicit in shaping students’ global, and outward perspective on issues through studying a range of texts and other materials. Developing life-long learning skills, creating skills that enable students as real world thinkers to “independently... find connections between ideas” is represented by six teachers as a model of what contemporary Englishes should strive to evoke. The contextualised study of: ‘Identity and Belonging’, ‘Whose
Reality?’ ‘The Imaginative Landscape’ and ‘Encountering Conflict’ in V.C.E. English were regarded as relevant and authentic universal contexts. Alternative contexts were suggested by some, including ‘Hope and Humanity’, ‘Faith and Reason’ and ‘Living Sustainably’, as embodying the debates that will shape future human experience. Students’ ability to intellectually engage with these ideas and respond to civic debates is invariably described in growth terms. English is a “garden bed”, “a landscape” and “a rich field of ideas”. Students’ engagement in this field leads to a “blooming”, “growing up and growing in the world”, “scaling new heights” and “maturing as young adults and real world leaders”. The transformative power of English, through significant encounters with wider contexts, is poignantly portrayed in Joy’s reflection:

“I like to broaden their horizons, which sometimes are very, very narrow... we are an unusual country town in that we are a tourist town so it is not for example like we are stuck out in the Mallee or far east Gippsland or somewhere where that’s the community and you don’t really get a lot of interaction with other people, our kids do! The shrinking world has meant that kids, for whom a trip to Albury when I first came here was a big deal, you know, are now going overseas several times a year... For all that their horizons are theoretically broader, they’re still not... they are still country kids and our kids can be quite parochial... but being able to gradually broaden some of those... or just put other stuff out there for them to think about that maybe they hadn’t done before, that is certainly something that I like doing... I like the idea that I can make a difference.”

Joy’s reflection represents a pattern in teachers’ responses, which celebrates teacher autonomy in English. The teacher’s role as “facilitator”, “guide” and “ideas go to person” is celebrated as meaningfully shaping how students encounter the immediate, online and future worlds they discursively inhabit. Joy’s view implies a need for English to be a diverse space, encompassing more than the study of literary forms, in order to navigate the “shrinking world”. As a librarian Joy sees the diminishing presence of reading in her students’ lives as having real world implications. Engaging students in reading the world through literary and non-literary texts is portrayed as developing their ability to synthesise information and formulate opinions on global ideas. Joy’s assertion “I like to broaden their horizons” and personal affirmation “I like the idea that I can make a difference [and] I believe it is actually true” portrays the English teacher as an evangelist, opening the world to her students. These positions Joy, and others including Kerrin, Mary, Mark, Grace and Ella assert, evoke Reid’s (2013) claims that English educators have a responsibility to introduce students to other worlds and experiences. The positioning of ‘I’ as the subject of these kinds of evangelist utterances, “I like to open their eyes” and “I like to
play the devil’s advocate to challenge them”, reinforces constructions of English as a subject about relationships, ideas and contextualising these as students “grapple with the world”.

Ewan, Mark and Ella construct a view of English teaching as essentially “grappling with”, “juggling”, and “dancing around” ideas, which is part of living in shifting global, and for Joy and Kerrin, regional contexts. Joy’s empowering metaphor of English as broadening students’ horizons resonates with Grace’s depiction of “this kind of snobby attitude where you sort of layer people”. While Grace’s cautious tone implies she is conscious that ‘layering’ her students’ understanding may seem pretentious, Joy’s endeavour to “just put other stuff out there for them to think” is contextualised as a redemptive feature of English in an age where students’ skills are “stunted”, and similarly described by other teachers as “blunt tools”, “dull instruments” and “rusty”. Joy’s perspective is discursively shaped by the rural context of her school. Joy’s students reside in a rural town, which Joy socially distinguishes from more remote and isolated districts like the Mallee. Her students’ identities are shaped by the interactions of commercial tourism, providing opportunities to experience and appreciate social and cultural diversity. Her students’ world is also “theoretically broader” because of global travel opportunities, “kids for whom a trip to Albury when I first came here was a big deal... are now going overseas several times a year.” Whilst globalism is seen as creating opportunities for migration, travel and cultural development, a core motif in teachers’ reflections is a perception that students are limited by their immediate contexts. Implicit in Joy’s depiction of broadening her “quite parochial” students’ perspectives is a construction of the English teacher as central to, and powerful in, making a difference in her students’ lives. Teachers construct a view of English as a subject founded upon ideas using sailing metaphors to describe their role in “sailing through troubled waters”, “charting a course through contexts”, and “hoisting the flag” when they encounter opposition, low student motivation, and changes to texts and Outcomes. English is depicted as the “antidote”, “a cocktail” and “the crucible” in which elements of the course are mixed together by the teacher to broaden students’ understanding of the world and its infinite possibilities for “ongoing creativity” and “potential for discord”. The teacher is depicted in Joy, Kerrin, Mary and Grace’s reflections as the tribal elder, wise mentor, or significant adult, who through exposing students to universal ideas within wider contexts, transforms students’ lives, countering issues of geographic isolation.

6.2 LITERARY CONSTRUCTIONS OF ENGLISH

Working so closely with transcripts and grappling to discern the meanings in each evokes a complex portrait of English practice. Literary constructions of English are frequently embedded in teachers’ perspectives of the transformative power and democratic appeal of literature. When these teachers talk about literature, literary texts, or literary fiction they create a binary that is distinct from other texts and fiction. Through reading and responding to literary texts, students
imaginatively inhabit the world and are in turn reshaped by these encounters. While some teachers, including Mary, Kerrin and Mark, advocate literature should be central to an English curriculum because of “its potential to propel students to other dimensions”, “it’s fuel for ideas”, and “food for thought”, others including Norah and Ella, adopt more moderate stances regarding its importance. Most teachers view English as enriching students’ lives and their connection to the world. Those teachers who favour literary versions of English see this enrichment as magnified by the wealth of ideas and perspectives presented in great literature from the past, and challenging voices of modern times. Ewan’s reflection on the purpose of English tellingly frames the high value some teachers place on literature as a precursor for understanding the universal ideas that constitute human experience:

They understand the, the big concepts and ideas that only literature can contain – the time capsule, the big ideas that are contained there. Next that they can understand themselves by looking at the world of literature, so it’s a sense of self awareness, self understanding and growth at a critical time as young readers so that they’re exposed to those sort of things and that then provokes within the English classroom very rich discussions and understandings.

Ewan’s reflection is an extract from a more lengthy response on what an English course should entail, which highlights the importance of literary inquiry. His thoughts articulate the sensitive connection between the world of the text, the self and others, which an engagement with literature evokes (McLean Davies, 2008). Ewan’s portrayal of V.C.E. English as cultivating students’ understanding of human experience echoes sentiments raised by others in the study who valorised the “universality” of English “across time, space and place”. Their reflections attribute a particular significance to literature, which is embodied in a broader discourse that privileges the literary aesthetic as an archive of human understanding (Sumara, 2002). The motif of literature as a “time capsule” is re-emphasised in terms of “the big concepts and ideas that only literature can contain”. Ewan’s remarks are part of a pattern in which literary approaches to English are valorised as the “treasuries” and “archives” of human history, experience and thought. His depiction of literary practice as provoking “very rich discussions and understandings” further epitomises the purposeful connections teachers make between literary inquiry and students ability to make sense of the world. His perception that the external “world of literature” significantly influences the internal “sense of self awareness, self understanding and growth” of readers is a recurring pattern in teachers’ reflections. In these “noble”, “age-old” textual constructions of English, students simultaneously learn about the world and themselves as caretakers, citizens and creators of its future.

Literary Englishes are depicted as the “moral heartland”, “ethical compass” and “democratic bounty”, encompassing a heritage of views and values, which remain relevant in modern times.
As a teacher librarian and self-proclaimed ‘old school’ English teacher, Mark forthrightly captures this resonating viewpoint in his assertion that literature “from people six, seven hundred years ago is still valid today because they’re writing about something, which is part of our human experience”. Thinking with literature and through literary lenses is described in metaphors of travel and exploration. Students “mine their ideas”, teachers take students on “guided tours of the past”, and literature itself “captures them in a swirling vortex of big ideas”. There is a pattern of democratic discourses framing some teachers’ reflections. The relationship between teacher, reader and text, and the discussions that surround this interaction, fulfils a deeper purpose of English as a philosophical and civilising subject. Literary Englishes are depicted as discursive intellectual spaces, in which students are co-navigators of the imaginary worlds created by authors. Students are portrayed as adventurers, building upon their teacher’s mapping of the text and its concerns, to explore ideas independently. Whilst some students are seen as bound by limitations others are portrayed as “flying” and “going leaps and bounds” ahead of their peers, developing their own plausible interpretations of the text. All teachers’ reflections valorise this capacity for students to extend their thinking beyond the text and grasp the world. Grace’s reflection particularly highlights the discursive pattern of describing V.C.E. English in terms of its literary power to expose the world.

So we’ll do a lot of work on the plague and its consequences and the society of the time before we hit into the text solidly, so you’ve got an opportunity to make kids interested in what’s going on around them... I think the value of ... being able to reach out and grasp the rest of the world is what English gives them, so when you study a text, when you look at the issues in the world, when you... look at the way people express themselves and the like, it’s just a world opening thing and that’s what I like about teaching English, it’s the ability... to grapple with the real world and I always tell my kids that’s what English is for – it’s to give you the skills to deal with everything else.

Embedded in Grace’s explanation of how she approaches a study of Geraldine Brook’s novel, The Year of the Plague, is a more deeply engaging view of how textual study is discursively constructed. The inclusive language teachers’ use, “we’ll do a lot of work” implies how significant relationships are in shaping how they work with literary texts. The world is simultaneously portrayed as a concrete entity that can be grasped through texts, and also an abstract landscape that students need adaptive thinking skills to navigate. Underpinning teachers’ perspectives is an appreciation of V.C.E. English as a contextualised global subject, and literature as similarly contextualised by authors and readers across time. Working together on understanding the socio-political and historical contexts of literary texts facilitates a greater aim of English. Textual versions of English, inclusive of literary and non-literary genres,
recognise the sociality of meaning-making in the “real world”, “out there on the planet”, “across the globe”, by providing opportunities for students to be co-authors of meaning. Meaning-making is visually depicted in fluid metaphors of “crossing rivers”, “dipping in and out of the world in texts, like a swimmer in a wave”, and “letting the world of the text wash over [students] until they can’t see the shore”. Immersion in the textual world is further equated, in all teachers’ reflections, to immersion in the real world, evident in Grace’s metaphor of it as “a world opening thing”. Literary Englishes in this sense are an authentic encounter with the world. This is further emphasised in the language of empowerment teachers’ use: students “reach out and grasp the rest of the world”; literary study is an “opportunity”, and English “a gift of life-long meaning.”

Textual practice, as part of a literary construct of V.C.E. English, is viewed as enacted for a higher purpose, which the teacher is complicit in forming. The world, as an abstract evolutionary platform of ideas, requires independence and flexibility to explore “the issues in the world”, “and to think about the big ideas on the horizon”. In order to participate effectively in this exchange of ideas, students need to learn “the way people express themselves and the like” and in turn develop their own linguistic repertoires of response. English is depicted as an intellectual and ethical site in which this exchange is already made possible through the study of literature embodying ideas; language and aesthetics that students might be inspired by. Literature as a civilised aesthetic is particularly valorised as part of a subject historically associated with humanism, evident in the motifs of growth and humanity throughout teachers’ recounts. Literary study “plants the seeds of thought”, “illuminating what it means to be human”, and “to think and to feel beyond youthful narcissism”. Canvassing a broad range of literary and fictional genres, including novels, short stories, poetry, plays and film texts is depicted as the ideal, although the realities of text selection means sometimes comprising on form in order to get the “kids interested in what’s going on around them”. Ensuring there is a broad interpretive approach to textual study is particularly emphasised as paramount to enriching students’ everyday encounters with the physical and virtual worlds of their experience. Grace's view that textual study gives students the “skills to deal with everything else”, poignantly alludes to the challenges of human existence that students are expected to be cognisant of despite their youth. English creates, from this perspective, a valuable encounter with the real experiences of the world, and a way of “imagining experience from the safety of their seats”. Making connections between ideas in texts and external experience is a foundation of how English contributes to a higher purpose of “lifelong learning” and “independently... finding connections between ideas”.

The fundamental importance of literary approaches to English is embedded in notions of what counts as meritorious literature. Whilst all fictional texts are portrayed as inviting students to
Imagine the world; it is only literary texts that are depicted as “working on the soul”, “awakening conscience” and “signifying the very essence of who we are”. Literature is relational and semiotic, engaging young readers in making sense of the symbolism and signs of human experience that will enable them to come of age in the world. Mary’s reflection encapsulates this idea more fully:

Authors who write like ‘The Slap’ for example are looking at something a bit deeper. They’re wanting people to walk away and feel like something about their world view has been challenged or confronted... it’s the bridge between our world of adolescence and adulthood, when we expose kids to good literature and reading... we’re saying to them, ‘you know this is part of your journey from being a kid to an adult. You can participate in this world, you can understand it, and you are part of the vocabulary and ideas of it.

In Mary’s account literary merit is about “looking at something a bit deeper”. Her reference to Christos Tsiolkas’ contemporary Australian novel ‘The Slap’ frames her perspective of what literary authors strive to elicit from their readers, “to walk away and feel something about their world view has been challenged or confronted”. Discursively, Mary’s reflection also alludes to what she wants her students to experience: to be challenged and confronted through exposure to “good literature and reading”. Her discussion is rich in imagery, with the repeated motif of the “bridge” symbolising literature and the “journey” as symbolic of the transition from adolescence to adult understanding. These images are part of an enlightened and romantic discourse evident in many teachers’ reflections. Engagement with literary ideas is portrayed as “a passionate love affair”, “a midnight crossing” and “a whirlwind trip” of self and worldly discovery. In transforming the lives of students, providing them with a moral and ethical compass, literary study leads to both personal and intellectual growth. Mary’s three empowering ‘you’ statements, symbolically represent the relational and semiotic ideas underpinning teachers’ perceptions “you can participate in this world, you can understand it, and you are part of the vocabulary and ideas of it”. The potential for students to interpret, signify and reconstruct meaning is fostered through literary approaches to English that allow exploration of both ideas and language.

V.C.E. English, as a subject that is language, text and ideas-centric, is represented in several teachers’ reflections as an ideal forum for addressing social change. Exploration, analysis and creative responses to texts are portrayed as ideological acts through which old hierarchies and privileged perspectives can be countered. References to English as a catalyst for social reform is particularly evident in the revolutionary metaphors and similes teachers express: “English has mastered the gentle art of revolution”, “English is to the future what steam was to the Industrialisation”, and “we’re [English teachers] flying on the winds of change”. There is a
sense of urgency that some teachers suggest differentiates English in current times to those that have been in the past and might unravel in the future. Images of the world as “shrinking”, moving faster and faster all the time” and travelling “express to the city without stopping all stations” underpin democratic depictions of English as the “grand equalizer”, and “master subject” in countering “blind authority”, “mindless obedience” and “social engineering through science”. Literary constructs of English are represented, even by Ella and Noarah who adopt more moderate stances, as ethically relevant to modern times and the development of an ethical and socially tolerant future. Kerrin’s response highlights some of the ideas associated with this dominant theme:

It needs to cater for changes in society... and I mean the world is moving faster and faster all the time and I think because of that we tend to be reactive rather than proactive... and I know it's difficult to predict where society is going to go and what technology is going to do next but we've got to try I think.... I think too an appreciation of what's shaped us as a society as well, which is kind of a 'broadie' kind of thing but how many times have kids gone 'oh Frankenstein that's gay, the language is gay', but when you pull it apart – we pulled it apart in Lit a couple of years ago in Year 11 – the moral and ethical issues in Frankenstein are the same things we encounter as a human species in IVF, stem cell research, you know, God versus science, development versus status quo, all those things.

The above excerpt is from a wider reflection Kerrin made about the capacity for V.C.E. English, through the Creating and Presenting Outcome to create a socially tolerant society, which celebrates cultural diversity. Her aspirations are part of a professional discourse echoed in many of the teachers’ responses about the impact of rapid social and technological change on human identity. The English teacher is frequently depicted as a competitor, “racing against the clock”, “facing down the gauntlet”, “plugging the sinkhole” and “holding back the dam”, which connects to Kerrin’s concern that “we tend to be reactive rather than proactive.” A recurring theme in some teachers’ reflections is a fear of society becoming increasingly desensitised and potentially dehumanised as a result of rapid developments in science and technology. Deconstructing literature, and other “genuinely substantial”, “meaty”, and “more weighty” texts, is portrayed as potentially balancing the perils of rapid change. Whilst “it's difficult to predict where society is going to go” and “what technology is going to do”, Kerrin, similar to Mark and Mary, suggests it is important for English to sustain an appreciation “of what's shaped us as a society as well”. Issues like stem cell research and genetic engineering, which are seen as intrinsically challenging human identity, are conversely celebrated in some teachers’ responses as symbolic of human ingenuity. There is a need for literary English to be a “springboard”, “platform” and “stepping stone” for thinking about the implications of moral
and ethical issues: God versus science, individuality versus conformity, imperfections versus perfection among these. Although Kerrin’s mimicry of her students’ opposition to literary texts is amusing, “oh Frankenstein that’s gay, the language is gay” she asserts the power literary inquiry has to question “development versus status quo”. Literary constructions of English are founded on an appreciation of the relevance, integrity and ideological challenges of working with literature. The moral issues embodied in literary genres are, Kerrin suggests, the “same things we encounter as a human species”, and as such provoke students to constructively think about the world through the lens of the text.

6.2.1 Literature, society, culture and identity

Teachers construct textual versions of English, which are deeply embedded in cultural and global discourses. Literature and other selected works are seen as an embodiment of the significant voices and moments that have defined and continue to influence humanity. Humanity is a broadly conceptualised term, some teachers seeing this as a synonym of the human condition and others as the “the complex sum” of the better qualities that define humane and civilised society. Those teachers who see global unification and tolerance as infinitely achievable, value this as a resolution to “rampant consumerism” and “industry destroying sustainable systems”. Cultural enlightenment is portrayed as the ideological aim of an evolving democratic society. The claims Norah, Kerrin, Mark and Grace articulate in favour of literary study are reminiscent of Medway’s (2010) depiction of an enlightened philosophy based upon respectful “human relations: humanity, belief in the shared humanity of all men and women [and] acknowledgement of intuition, feeling and imagination” (p. 10). Literary study espouses a kind of ethical inquiry into how people experience the world, acting as a social harmoniser. This is evident through teachers’ metaphors of tribalism and family, depicting society as a potentially Utopian construct. Students are described as inheriting a world of literature and ideas from “their forefathers”, and progressively viewed as “the children whose progeny will shape the future”. Global relations are embodied in metaphors of the “worldly tribe”, “universal tribe”, “one big human clan”, “and lots of tribes, one family”. Literary texts and other fictional genres are perceived as encapsulating the stories of the tribes, and imaginatively creating a universal bond of understanding.

Teachers envision literature as having a form of social power, through which cultural divisions and social discord are overcome in favour of a culturally tolerant society. Principles of egalitarianism underpin democratic discourses, evident in teachers’ valorisation of “walking in other peoples shoes”, “walking the walk” and “seeing inside other people’s homes and families”. The ability to consider alternative viewpoints is portrayed as a core element of V.C.E. English, and the desirable outcome of English programs in general. Through critiquing the social, economic and cultural conditions of characters and themes in texts, “seeds of revolution
are sown”, “new possibilities are imagined” and individuals “grow to see themselves as part of a greater condition”. The literary aesthetic is particularly portrayed as a powerful purveyor of cultural understanding, and intercultural understanding. Whilst British and European cultures are perceived as “part and parcel of English study”, and “part of a literary staple diet”, Eastern, South American and Indigenous literatures are seen as underrepresented, resulting in a “cultural deficit”. In a pluralistic society, understanding cultural belief systems and values is seen as a unifying practice that ties the themes and contexts in V.C.E. English to the broader world. Questioning, and interrogating literature is a process of learning culture, a concept some teachers expressed as a discrete entity, and others as an abstract concept of value-laden ideas, mythologies and ideals. Ella’s reflection captures, to some degree, the emphasis teachers place on teaching and learning culture through literary inquiry:

I guess because the focus in each of the areas of study is in some way text based, it means that texts are a really great opportunity to teach culture or to study culture in some way whether it’s our culture or other cultures and things like cultural symbols and phrasing and all that sort of thing that might slip through in any other subject… this subject really lends itself to being able to do that.

A recurring theme in Norah, Ewan and Mary’s reflections is a view of texts as signifiers of cultural reproduction. The meanings embedded in the language and structural elements of the texts, are “actively brought into the light”, and discussed in terms of the socio-political and cultural ideas they represent. While many teachers resisted fixed notions of culture, some perceived it as a concrete entity, evident in Ella’s assertion it is something possible to “teach” and “study”. Literary texts are depicted as “cultural deposits”, “archives” and “artistic fossils”, and literary practices as archaeology; “unlocking the secrets of the past”, “digging through mysteries of thought” and “chipping away at the block … the kind of society we want to be”. The senior English subject is textually constructed as an ideal curriculum space for exploring cultural formation emphasised in Ella’s conviction that “this subject really lends itself to being able to do that.” Significant to this civilising view of V.C.E. English is an appreciation of multiculturalism as the “exciting reality” of Australian society, and the “atlas of the future”. English is ethically portrayed as developing students’ sense of Australian identity, and interaction with “other cultural groups” with particular emphasis on understanding how this shapes their worldview. Teaching culture therefore, embodies enabling students “to interpret the world, formulate their own responses to that and deliver those effectively”. Literary approaches to English, in this sense, are entwined with a broader philosophical aim to create social cohesion locally, nationally and globally.

A particular valuing of Australian culture and identity emerged in some teachers’ reflections as significantly representative of what V.C.E. English should encompass, and instil in students’
lives. Mary, Kerrin and Ella portray the teaching of Australian literature in English as a necessary uniqueness; "it's what makes our English, English", "relevant to our kids" and "preserves our identity as Australians – whatever that means". Deepening students’ appreciation of their national identity and how this influences their perspectives is framed as an ethical responsibility for English subjects in Australia. Encountering ideas and perspectives, in ways that are uniquely represented through "the Aussie vernacular", and "Australian voices" is particularly valorised. Australian literature is seen as semiotically representing the ideas of the nation, and the modern world in ways that are familiar and accessible to readers, evoking a sense of familiarity that allows for deeper reading. Literary texts such as Bruce Dawe’s collected poems, Sometimes Gladness, are seen as challenging readers to make connections. This idea is captured in Ella’s perspective:

> Bruce Dawe actually talks about Australian and national identity in many ways so that he is great for the kids to actually connect with. But I also... have a feeling that... it’s important for the sake of Australian literature and not just for the sake of the kids’ learning as well, too, for it to be considered important enough for it to be in the curriculum, not as a token thing... It’s only by being exposed to it and understanding it... frequently... and grappling with it and arguing with it and that sort of thing that it will continue to have an audience... otherwise it could run the risk of being relegated to a kind of... obscure art that only a few people participate in and I wouldn’t want to see that.

Ella establishes a clear valuing of Australian literature as necessary for student learning and also the preservation of national literary culture. Ella’s assertion that students need to be "grappling with it and arguing with it and that sort of thing so that it will continue to have an audience", highlights the significance some teachers attach to Australian literature. Teachers’ depictions of V.C.E. English are discursively shaped by an appreciation for the Australian literary aesthetic, signified in Ella’s reference to it as a potentially "obscure art". Ella’s appreciation of Dawe’s diversity, "he talks about Australian and national identity in many ways", represents the sentimental view toward Australiana, which many teachers, particularly Kerrin and Mark emphasised. From Banjo Patterson, to Gwen Harwood, Sally Morgan and Markus Zusak, Australian literature is seen as encompassing the breadth of national voices and experiences that have contributed to nationhood since colonial times. Ella’s affirmation of Dawe’s poetry resonates with this prominent theme in teachers’ accounts in which Australian literature is seen as "making visible" the changing nature of society from colonial days to modern time. The inclusion of these texts in the curriculum is part of a contextualised view of V.C.E. English as a subject inevitably bound to Australian culture. Students are depicted as needing "to know their own roots", "their identity as migrants", "the horrid history of Aboriginal genocide" and "the
myths and legends of this place”, so they can understand their unique experience of being
Australian and how this “colours” their world view. Developing students’ cultural appreciation
of “our heritage” within V.C.E. English is also valorised as a social equalizer. V.C.E. English is
depicted as a dynamic intellectual and human space where literary study has the “cultural
capital” to heal indigenous relations and celebrate multiculturalism.

Teachers’ conceptualisation of literature as a “humanist resource” and “moralising force”
allude to the Utopian ideals literary Englishes are seen to evoke. V.C.E. English, to some degree
as a literary or textual construct, is depicted as a civilising and moralising subject, centred upon
texts that embody social ideals and values. Influenced by Humanism, there is an evangelical
view of literary study as cultivating a deeper appreciation of civilised values. Social cohesion is
a realisation of the “heart and soul that joins us”, “our ethical conscience we’re always
grappling with” and “the harmonising force that binds us even after the book ends”. The
potential for society to become dehumanised and desensitised to beauty, art, and expression is
seen by some teachers as symptomatic of an age consumed by standards, productivity and
technology. Preservation of morality and ethics through literary study and inquiry is portrayed as
“the power of stories” and the “essential narratives” that have historically, albeit differently,
shaped English subjects in Victoria and elsewhere. Literary inquiry is valorised as enabling and
promoting students’ ability to think conceptually and reflectively about texts and contexts in
ways that procure deeper valuing of human identity and society. Furthermore, promoting literary
senior Englishes is inextricably tied, in some teachers’ reflections, to counterbalancing the
potential for egocentricity, a “natural state of youth”, that is intensified by living in the “cusp of
Dr. Google” and “tweets, posts and likes”. Students’ engagement with social media is partially
framed as an expression of young people’s natural curiosity about the world and “its infinite
possibilities”. Whilst interactive social media is portrayed as enabling students to “connect with
the world”, and “keep in touch locally and globally”, interactions with literature are portrayed
in philosophical ways as “traversing space and place”, “engaging with the great minds”, and
“exploring the human abyss”.

A common theme in some teachers’ reflections is a view of English as philosophically
broadening students’ understanding of the world. Literature is depicted as enriching students’
understandings of human experience by framing the present as a fluid, and shifting “dialogue
with the past”. Four teachers portrayed students’ conceptual skills as inhibited by their lack of
general knowledge and broader understanding of social and historical events, which form the
“foundations”, “building blocks” and “fundamental frames” of human potential. To consider
the future, “to imagine beyond the literature”, and “to traverse the page”, is underpinned by
knowing how history has shaped the present age and how it might be used as a platform for
considering the issues of the “new age”, “technological age”, or “new world”. Literary
Englishes in this sense, provide the historical lenses and time capsules through which human experience and understanding is immortalised, so that “generations of readers” can review, reflect and critically respond to issues of conflict, environment, ethics, science, culture and identity. Joy, Kerrin, Mark and Mary emphasised the necessity of giving students a “brief history lesson”, examining the authorial, social, cultural and historical contexts of literary texts. Exploring literary contexts is depicted as “paving the way”, and “switching on the light in reader’s minds” so they can independently explore meaning through informed understanding of the past and with contemporary insight. Trying to work philosophically and conceptually with texts in this way is part of the literary identity English subjects are thought to have “always espoused”, “been philosophically committed to”, and “ideologically pursuant of... with all its grand ideals”.

Conceptual, literary constructions of English are ideologically perceived as elucidating the grand ideas informing human identity. Human identity is depicted in evolutionary metaphors; “what makes us human are creative and adaptive responses to the world”, “our ability for higher order thought” and a critical appreciation for the global community we are “moving into, evolving into and living with”. Embedding literary and textual study within English is depicted as promoting an exchange of ideas that helps students realise and articulate their identity, as human beings who possess individual will and the power to contribute to a collective global conscience. The students’ critical appreciation of literary and historical heritage is depicted, to varying degrees, as signifying their deeper valuing of cultural and civic identity. This concern is most clearly evident in Kerrin’s assertion “we’re forgetting history actually shapes who we are and the kids need to have an understanding of history, of literature, of language because it all contributes to who we are”. English subjects, alongside the Humanities, cultivate a schooling culture through which students develop the ability “to conceptualise the historical developments” that shape the human condition. Some teachers, especially Joy and Kerrin, make exaggerated claims of students’ egocentric world view, “they think mobile phones and computers have been around forever”, and “pilgrims travelled by planes to America” to justify a more literary approach to English. Students are portrayed as needing to engage with literature as the semiotic landscape of meaning-making, and the archive of “the human story... the human heart” in order to conceptualise and intellectualise cultural ideas. This is particularly pertinent in Joy’s reflection:

I don’t think it is specific to English, but I would like them to leave with an appreciation of things which are different... cultural things... the ability to think, which encompasses to think for themselves, to think through things and not just automatically parrot what the last person has said – be that a teacher, buddy or whoever – to take an interest in things outside of themselves or their own
immediate concerns or environment, which is a challenge with teenagers, egocentric people that they are! To be prepared to put forward an opinion, to express an opinion to be prepared and to be able to support it or justify it... when the Year 12 V.C.E. English was being revised... there was a considerable uproar about what appeared to be the proposed content that many people thought was the dumbing down of what the kids were expected to do, particularly in terms of the number of texts and the type of texts that were to be studied and I subscribed to that opinion, I thought it was not a good direction... we do not do our kids any favours by lowering the bar.

Literary constructions of English can be seen, through this extract, as strongly encompassing values associated with cultural identity. An appreciation of “cultural things” is aligned to participation in the world through language and consideration of ideas. The insinuation of the “considerable uproar” that ignited in response to changes to V.C.E. English highlights the tensions around text study. Fostering students’ interest and inquiry into “things which are different” is an embodiment of an English subject in which students explore, through literary and fictional texts, how they are positioned as cultural subjects. A pattern emerged across teachers’ responses in which students’ ability to discursively adopt, challenge or resist how they are positioned in relation to ideas was seen as enacted through language (Kress, 2006a). Accessibility to ideas and how they are signified is part of an approach to English that allows students to “think through things [and] outside of themselves or their own immediate concerns or environment”. A recurring theme in teachers’ accounts is a civilising view of V.C.E. English that resists “lowering the bar”, “resorting to the dregs” or “bailing water”. V.C.E. English as a text-based study is portrayed in alliterative terms as “enriching experience”, “facilitating the future”, and “shaping society”. Whilst literary texts are valued as part of this enterprise, English is valued by some as distinctly needing the inclusion of a broad range of texts, including new forms, to empower students as meaning-makers. This idea is partially represented in Mark’s reflection:

As a senior school subject I think it should include those elements of reading and writing and through that understanding what they’re reading and writing... but I think that obviously we should be studying texts of some type not just... printed texts but also getting into some of the modern visual texts and things like that and understanding them, but we should also be keeping on reminding them that there’s a wealth of previous literature available for them to understand and obviously in senior school they should be starting to be able to think for themselves [and] understanding... how and why people use language and various other aspects to persuade someone else to adopt their point of view. I think we need to encourage
kids to become responsible citizens and therefore, they need to understand what influence society has on them and how they can both understand it and counter it if they need to.

Many of the teachers, particularly Mark, Norah, Kerrin and Ella perceived English, as a cultural and textual subject, inherently concerned with society and responsibilities of citizenship. Mark’s assertion “we should be studying texts of some type, not just… printed texts but also getting into some of the modern visual texts and things like that” embodies a view of the potential diversity V.C.E. English has to broaden students world view. V.C.E. English in several teachers’ accounts is seen as a space that provokes dialogue and new possibilities for how students understand the “influence society has on them”. The enduring presence of literature and its merit as a civilising aesthetic is valued by many teachers, evident in Mark’s claim, “we should also be keeping on reminding them that there’s a wealth of previous literature available for them to understand”. The value of literature, alongside other texts, is ultimately about students’ engagement with language and perspective. Mark’s assertion that students need to specifically understand persuasive language is connected to creating responsible citizens who are able to account for themselves by reproducing society’s signifying practices (Belsey, 2002). In this context, students’ understanding of language serves a greater socialised aim in which students develop citizenship values of tolerance and understanding. However, the result is not necessarily social cohesion, but social responsibility in which students are encouraged to think independently and “counter [society] if they need to”. A textual construction of English, therefore, scaffolds opportunities for inquiry, which leads students to develop forms of sociality that enable them to lead “confident and productive lives” (Kress, 2006b, p. 32).

6.2.2 Literature, literacy and literary culture

Extending students’ awareness of how language shapes, maintains and intervenes in human relationships through signifying meaning is a core theme across the teachers’ reflections. Textual practices: reading, writing and responding to literature and other texts engages students in analytical and creative processes of inquiry, positioning them to consider how these represent choices of language (Morgan, 2004). V.C.E. English in this sense provokes students’ questioning of texts and ideas, providing opportunities to examine language and to be active meaning-makers. The study of “substantial texts” and “literary literature” in V.C.E. English is depicted as potentially cultivating a literary culture, in which students become literate interpreters and signifiers of meaning. However, often this view is undermined by the “grounded”, “all too true” and “inevitable” realities of V.C.E. English being a general course for “all comers”. A few teachers describe English in basic terms as the “lock, stock and barrel”, “the house wine” and “steerage class”, whilst the separate course English Literature is depicted in elitist terms as the “crème de la crème”, “the Moet Chandon” and “first class passage”. The
perceived differences in student clientele inhibits to some degree, the literary aims teachers confidently describe as the features of a civilised, literate society. Literature is valorised as promoting a literary culture that is depicted in evangelical terms as fostering “the development of great minds”, and creating an intellectual “knowledge economy from which human innovation has always grown”. These ideals are partially represented in Norah’s reflection:

I wanted to be able to at least inspire kids who maybe aren’t passionate about books and don’t see their value to make them realise that they are enjoyable and that they are a way of getting them out of their own experience, and I’ve really got quite a passion for being able to teach kids how to communicate so I see like, it’s the bigger English picture to me, it’s not just about studies in the classroom its about them being able to become effective learners, to become effective adults.

Norah’s view of “the bigger picture” is informed by two stances evident in many teachers’ reflections: an appreciation of the literary aesthetic, and a competing recognition of new technologies and communication demands. The repetition of “effective learners... effective adults” is akin to other references to being “savvy consumers”, “productive citizens” and “successful innovators”, which are contextually informed by democratic and neo-liberalist values. Norah’s linguistic choices are overtly aspirational; lexemes like “inspire” and “realise” contribute to an influential view of the English teacher’s role in shaping learners’ engagement with the world. Her passion for literary approaches as a “way of getting them out of their own experience” is particularly situated within an aesthetic valuing of literature. Literature is given a special authority by Mary, Grace, Joy, Mark and Kerrin as transforming individuals’ lives, by opening them to imagining new experiences through intellectual and emotional engagement with the aesthetic (Sumara, 2002). There is a kind of literary culture that classroom study prepares students for: “the world of plays and theatre”, “coffee shops in dingy lanes with soiled paperbacks”, “a world of berets and philosophy”, and “intellectual discussions about art, humanity, Chekov and liberty”. Inhabiting this world of ideas and finding a sense of belonging in literary communities is part of the greater ideological aim of broadening students’ minds and realms of human experience. In a more practical sense, belonging to this literary culture is seen as a platform for addressing social change; it is an intellectual and imaginative space, and one that is conceptually connected to “dreary reality”, “the fervour of social change” and the experiences of “real-life”.

A prominent theme in teachers’ accounts is a view that V.C.E. English should prepare students for life beyond their schooling years. Norah’s repeated references to “real life” colours her perception of how literary constructions of English, alongside media studies, might counter the detrimental effects of living in a global economy. Kerrin and Mary similarly contrast the democratic appeal of a more literary approach to English to non-literary models that might
become “a frightening reality”, “an Orwellian truth” if teacher autonomy is lost to market demands. Informed by neo-liberalist economic discourses in which their students are positioned as market consumers, teachers frame literary English as an antidote to the “base-line literacy stuff”, which diminishes their profession and the literate aims of V.C.E. English. These teachers esteem the ideological purpose literary study serves in provoking students’ awareness of how views and values are embedded in language and always open to contestation. The motif of being the “savvy consumer” represents a commodity culture (Singh & Han, 2006), in which students are seen as targeted by a market economy. The immediate accessibility of the global market and the machinations of persuasion, create a demand for students to understand “how media works”, and “how history has been shaped by literature and language”. In Norah’s account to be “savvy” is to not only understand the implications of how media “works” but to also be a user and producer of meaning. Literature alongside media and language studies has a significant role in creating globally literate citizens who can operate in a competitive knowledge economy. English, through literary practice, is portrayed as actually empowering students to use language and skills of persuasion to influence the global communities. Teachers describe their students’ transition as a journey away from “being duped” to becoming “savvy” and in some accounts, becoming “expert producers” who are empathetically capable of “valuing stories and other peoples stories.”

Literary constructions of V.C.E. English are discursively located alongside non-literary versions, working “simultaneously with other agendas”, “in context of everything else that is crammed in there”, yet somehow remaining unique: “it’s got a special place”, “up there on the pedestal”, and “it’s the mantelpiece... and maybe also it’s the fire that keeps burning years on”. Whilst romantic, nostalgic views of literature exist, they are moderated by the influence of critical theory, evident in many teachers’ emphasis on the relationship between text, language and power. Ideological relations within texts are perceived as abstract “notions, values, concepts, ideas”, developed by writers and (re)produced by readers. In many teachers’ accounts, there is a recurring fear that texts might easily be mistaken as neutral when their ideas ought to be contextualised and challenged. Texts, including those depicted as canonical literature, are perceived as “deeply symbolic” and “subtly representational” of the significant ideas that have contributed to human thought, including the prejudices, injustices and silences that contemporary readers have an ethical responsibility to note. Themes and ideas are portrayed, using scientific metaphors, as fundamentally embodying views and values that need to be “surgically dissected”, “treated like an hypothesis” and “critically put under the microscope”. On one level students are expected to develop a literary literacy: a complex understanding of the diverse structures and symbolic forms literature can take. Knowing the genre rules, and navigating the semiotic world of the text to form a plausible reading is highly valorised. The ability to discern the aesthetic function of texts, and to consider how views and
values are embodied within them is also depicted as “the turn of the wheel” and “the lightning bolt” that allows the reader to transform and create meaning anew. Metaphors of “words lifting from the page”, “ideas taking flight”, “ideas sparking like electric wires” reinforce the transformative appeal teachers describe as naturally emanating from literary approaches to V.C.E. English. To achieve literary literacy, is synonymous too with being critically literate. Ewan’s reflection elucidates this idea:

Exposè kids to the canon but also to recurring notions, values, concepts, ideas; to the ways that those are developed; to the structures within texts... that’s part of what our responsibility is; understanding writing and how writing emanates from those things and understanding the use of language in writing... notions of basically being able to use language, and that’s obviously orally as well, to understand how it works, to be able to write, to be able to read and for me to read critically... If you’re talking about General English that’s actually to me where it actually sits pretty firmly.

Ewan’s perspective represents the complex view of what it means to be critically literate in the teachers’ reflections. The analytical, aesthetic and linguistic deconstruction of texts serves a pragmatic purpose; making students critically literate in ultimately understanding how language works. Pertinent to Ewan’s view of writing is an understanding of how the aesthetic function and symbolic form of the text contributes to meaning. Literature and other texts are recognised as the conceptions we construct of the world as opposed to the real conditions of it (Belsey, 2002). Ewan’s response presupposes that whilst students are typically incapable of evaluating language, they possess the capacity to understand “the use of language in writing” for the purpose of interpreting and signifying meaning in oral and written forms. Conceptually, teachers portray critical and literary literacies as sharing a common basis; recognising that readings are produced through language and open to the creation of new meaning. Whilst exposing students to the big ideas in the literary canon is important, exploring how these ideas are figuratively and discursively represented is imbued with greater importance. Indeed it is the attainment of this repertoire of skills: reading, writing, and responding to language, that “sits pretty firmly” as a pragmatic purpose of V.C.E. English. V.C.E. English as a textually rich subject with literary “roots”, “vines”, “ambitions” and “sometimes pretensions” is constructed as purposeful and empowering. Anecdotes about inspirational “wow”, “IT” and “light bulb” moments abound in teachers’ reflections, representing the powerful nexus they perceive between texts, language and response. Literature has a particular appeal, particularly in Mary, Mark, Joy and Kerrin’s accounts as evoking that sense of “richness and rigour” that a senior school English subject should promote. Even if students encounter only one literary text it is enough to ignite “a passion for ideas” and inspire “a flair for writing”. This literary ideal, however, is one teachers
also recognise as a challenge for the English profession. An appreciation of literary culture is often juxtaposed in teachers’ accounts to the perilous conditions of the modern age in which “readers have flipped the cover”, “gone from page to screen” and “lost the art of scouring a paperback”. V.C.E. English, to varying degrees, is depicted as a cultural and intellectual space in which “hope is restored”, and “the culture wars are won” by coercing readers to value the “printed word”, “the feel of a hardcover” and the “return to the page”. This appreciation for literary practice is partially evident in Grace’s contrast of film and literary text.

The idea that kids could just do a film as text is something that I thought – even though I firmly believe that we have to give the kids that critical visual literacy, that ability to actually look at what’s there and what it’s saying and how it’s manipulating and all those sorts of things. I think that in some senses it’s almost more important now than reading – but I think that literature inherently... has got a lot of benefits that you can’t get from a film, but in that process you know that when a book is taken and turned into a film you lose a lot of the richness and so if you just bow to the popular pressure ‘oh you know the kids are just watching the movies these days, they don’t read’, well then they miss out on the opportunity to find out that that richness is there.

In interviews with Grace, in both her English classroom and home, her appreciation of visual culture was apparent in the photographs and images adorning her walls, and how frequently these featured in her conversations about teaching. Grace’s viewpoint concurs with many teachers’ reflections, particularly Norah and Ella’s perspectives, suggesting that multimodal texts and films are becoming increasingly important as visual culture competes with “print mediums”, “white space” and “old print culture”. There is a precarious balance teachers seek to maintain in their depictions of V.C.E. English as a site “borne out of a literary heritage” but progressively “answering the call of 21st century learning”. Whilst in “some senses” teaching visual forms and film is considered more important, several teachers expressed concern about the potential challenge to textual constructions of V.C.E. English. Teaching film and multimodal texts is depicted as giving students opportunities to develop “critical visual literacy”, yet simultaneously teachers’ argue, like Grace, that “literature inherently... has got a lot of... benefits that you can’t get from a film”. The critical questions posed in working with the symbolic language of visual texts, “what it's saying and how it's manipulating”’ is portrayed as significant in creating literate citizens who can communicate in complex and meaningful ways. However, teaching film as text, or adaptations of novels is critiqued as losing that sense of ‘richness’, which a literary approach evokes. Many of the teachers spoke in sailing metaphors to convey their resistance to a completely non-literary or text focused approach to V.C.E. English. Teachers spoke of “treading water”, “manning the life rafts”, “keeping the
lighthouse on”, and “refusing to abandon ship” in a 21st century rush toward progress seen as possibly threatening literary culture. Grace’s refusal to “bow down” to the perceived pressure impinging on her profession is evident in her refusal to accept claims “the kids are just watching the movies these days, they don’t read”. Whilst some teachers saw V.C.E. English as a site of contestation, others framed the subject as a space where literary, media and multimodal practices have a unifying effect, challenging teachers and students to reader and respond to language in critical ways. Positive metaphors of “building a bridge”, “making a merger” and “marrying up” literary and non-literary approaches to V.C.E. English is ultimately viewed as “building culture”, “creating literacy” and “building toward the future”.

6.3 SUMMARY

In summation this chapter explored how teachers envision the purpose of English, or more specifically V.C.E. English, and how they construct a view of its core practices. Attention was given to the resonant themes underpinning teachers’ reflections on what English achieves in terms of its practical, intellectual, cultural and literary outcomes. On one hand their perceptions of English are framed by a non-literary emphasis. There is a recurring image of English as “a core business”, with “a realistic agenda”, and “the ultimate responsibility” to inform the development of literate citizens who can actively read, listen, think and respond to ideas of the world. However, there is a powerful binary operating in teachers’ discourses that juxtapose these pragmatic aims to the intellectual and philosophical ideas about English teaching, which many find inspirational and beautiful. Their desire to see literature remain in English studies is consistent with Goodwyn’s (2012) claims that despite the “official rhetoric and practical realities, English [in England] is still very focused on the study of literature” (p. 213). The importance of “creating culture” and exposing students to “literary arts” is integral to a literary view of English, constructed around issues of identity, nationhood, globalism, aesthetics, language and textuality. The imposition of “the powers that be” and “the end goal” of the examination is a pragmatic reality many of the teachers see as framing, and in some instances, inhibiting their work. Literary Englishes, albeit to varying degrees, are depicted as an antidote. The word ‘love’ communicates the personal relationship some teachers, particularly Kerrin, Joy and Mary, have with literature alongside other complex emotions (Goodwyn, 2010). Literature is particularly valorised as helping to achieve higher aspirational ideals by those teachers who position themselves as leaders who “have to be a bit of a Nostradamus in making predictions these days”, working “at the frontier”, while somehow remaining “guardians” and “gatekeepers” of past tradition and literary practice.

Chapter Seven explores teachers’ perceptions of literary practice in more detail. Literature matters to these teachers, but it matters in different ways influenced by how they see its relevance to broadening their students’ horizons. The chapter particularly explores how teachers
define literature, perceive the canon and value the aesthetic ideals of a V.C.E. subject that also calls for critical inquiry. Issues of text selection are included as part of this discussion. How teachers perceive literature impacts on the texts they choose for their students and the critical light in which they see their autonomy as compromised by externally set text lists.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONSTRUCTIONS OF LITERATURE AND TEXT SELECTION

7.0 INTRODUCTION

Constructions of a literary English subject are inevitably subjective, evident in the many ways literature and its role is depicted in teachers’ accounts. How teachers view literature is a collective construction of their viewpoints on the elements they see as informing it. From “the tales of Masters” to “any kind of fiction text that’s worth its salt”, teachers’ interpretation of literature is informed by their perspectives on the literary canon, the aesthetic, and the passion and pleasure reading “evokes”, “inspires” and “passionately provokes”. Chapter Seven explores questions regarding the significance of literature in English, particularly teachers’ own valuing or devaluing of literary reading and beliefs about text selection. That literature is valued within V.C.E. English is uncontested among the teachers interviewed; English comfortably encompasses working with literary texts in a subject concerned with language and text. However, there is considerable diversity in the teachers’ perceptions of what counts as literature, its relationship to other texts in the curriculum, its role in English as opposed to the subject Literature, and how they should encourage their students to respond as readers and writers.

A significant focus in this study was the degree to which literature matters to the teachers, and how they see the merit of literary approaches to English alongside other possible constructions. The chapter explores how teachers are shaped by their individual experiences of texts and language, and being part of “the greater collective” or “the wider profession” of English teaching. Often there are common threads in their viewpoints, although literature is a term teachers struggle to define, using it in different ways to describe both literary texts and particular practices – ways of reading and writing, which contrast to other textual practices in the classroom. This chapter begins with examining teachers’ constructions of literature; something all value to some degree but see in different ways. However, literature is generally regarded as a source of pleasure and purpose, transforming the lives of readers who seek to imagine the worlds described or to critique the views presented. Possibilities, not limitations of human thought and endeavour, are “brought into the light” and “illuminated” through studying the ideas and the aesthetics of both canon and other texts.

The second part of the chapter focuses on issues of text selection, and teachers’ attitudes toward text lists and literature’s place in V.C.E. English. Literature is particularly valorised as cultivating a deeper realisation of the world. For some of the teachers literary text selection makes this possible “by throwing open”, “breaking out” and “freeing” students from the
silences and social inequalities of power. Others see literature as reinvigorating their students’ sense of joy and hope. Whilst literary approaches to English are acknowledged as “having merit” and “being a good thing”, the teachers’ reflections also illuminate how other approaches to English might “give new life” and “enrich” students’ experience of language, text and meaning.

7.1 CONSTRUCTIONS OF LITERATURE

Literature is a subjective term the teachers can articulate a sense of, yet find challenging to define. Prior to the first interview teachers were asked to reflect on what literature is and how they saw its purpose and relevance, if any, to a general Senior English course. Some teachers suggested it is futile to try and define literature, as a subjective concept that “encompasses great thought, it can’t be narrowed to a sentence” and “it’s like trying to fit an entire universe into a box”. Teachers’ reflections mainly focused on identifying the literary texts that influenced their lives, linking this to their professional role now in “inspiring kids to think”, “showing them beauty” and “educating minds for life”. Literature in this broader sense is anything that inspires great feeling, thought or remembrance among readers. The teachers’ conceptions encompass a range of texts and textual traditions, suggesting it is “something enigmatic”, “a lingering sense”, or “a gut feeling” that sometimes identifies what literature is. The problem with denotations is compounded because teachers’ perspectives are coloured by their personal subjectivities, “perhaps I’m a romanticist”, “maybe it’s nostalgic”, “I don’t know overall, but for me it’s a personal sense”. Generally what connects the teachers’ perspectives is some understanding of a relationship between language, aesthetics, and response that elevates literature evident in claims it “pushes it to the next level”, “takes flight”, “transcends the ordinary” and “reaches for the starry heights”.

Sometimes it is explaining the difference – what literature is not – that enables the teachers to more clearly suggest what literature might be. Literature “doesn’t deal with topics, it explores complex issues”, “it’s not like Twilight – its more sophisticated than that”, “it’s not chick-lit – it’s more real life... somehow authentic”, and “it’s not just written to sell like cheap fiction, it has a kind of evident literary intention”. Literature and literary texts are somehow distinct from other texts, even quality fiction that “might be popular now, but won’t see another 50 years”. Texts are described as the “light weights of literature”, “your common breed not a pure pup”, and “ranging from the inconsequential to the substantial”. Literature, in contrast, is always described in significant terms as “the heavy weight”, “substantial”, “the nitty and gritty” and “the stuff of greatness”. Texts are likewise “popular in their appeal” and “relevant to readers in an immediate sense of who we are and where we’re at now” whilst literature is “endearingly relevant” and “always subject to revival if it temporarily falls to the wayside”. There are five teachers who see literature as actually part of a textual continuum, with texts like ‘Chick-lit” on
one end of the range and literary texts at the other end. This perspective is evident in Mark’s reflection:

_Literature is something I see which is produced for people to read… it’s generally not factual but it contains information, it contains ideas and issues in some form like that…. It might be poetry as well… it might be a play… but it’s something which is written for somebody to read and to enjoy, as opposed to a text which is simply anything that’s produced by an author… and you can go right across the gamut of non-fiction texts right through to literary texts – that’s literary literature… films and all those sorts of things are all texts produced by an author._

Mark’s definition of text is any form of written material, including poetry and plays, which is intended for reading or oration. His definition of literature is at the extreme end of a textual range, evident in his reference to “the literary texts” or “literary literature”. Many of the teachers, particularly Ella and Kerrin, emphasise that literature like all texts contain ideas but notably have to have a special kind of intentionality – from the outset they are intended for a wider audience to read and appreciate. Whilst all texts are presumably authored for enjoyment, what Mark describes as “great literature” or “literary literature” defines works, often fictional, which are intended to promote deeper insight. This idea that literary texts are both pleasurable and insightful influences Mark’s view on what ultimately counts as literature. There is the literary literature associated with high cultural values or a cultivated aesthetic. Then there is other literature, including children’s literature, associated with pleasure, yet still taking a literary form of some kind. In Mark’s view a canonical novel such as Charles Dickens ‘Great Expectations’, children’s books and young adult novels might all be considered literature, though the former might be considered ‘literary literature’. Although canonical works and other literature are “poles apart in the sense of… audience and their intended purpose” because they are conceptually written for “entertainment of some form or thinking”, each is seen as meritorious. Mark’s simplistic reduction that texts, in contrast to literature, are simply “anything that’s produced by an author” appears in other teachers’ reflections, critiquing the absence of a literary aesthetic or purpose in these. Literary texts have an aesthetic quality that ultimately differentiates them from texts: they have “a unique form”, “a special voice” and “just something different – you can’t skim them, you must read them”, until “they almost overpower you”.

Whilst many teachers, particularly Mark, Joy and Mary, create a sense of certainty in their claims “there is an established canon”, “some works are definitely literature” and “you can feel a literary text from the first page”, there is some discrepancy in what should count as a literary canon. This issue is particularly evident in some teachers’ depictions of an Australian literary canon. Authors from Banjo Patterson to Barbara Baynton, to Judith Wright, Gwen
Harwood and Patrick Wright are examples of writers these teachers perceive as part of an Australian canon. Whilst Kerrin, Ewan, Norah and Ella articulate the importance of Australian literature in maintaining cultural heritage they are also aware of the ways literature “can reflect, negotiate and contest practices and beliefs of a society” (McLean Davies, 2009, p. 13). There is a critical, democratic discourse underpinning their concerns that this canon should be reviewed, “in light of our postmodern consciousness”, “progress in Indigenous relations” and “knowledge of how injustices are perpetrated”. Canons, rather than being fixed and immutable, are depicted as subject to change regardless of the author’s agenda and the positive reception they were given in other times. The difficulty of deciding what texts warrant literary merit is also evident in teachers’ critique of modern authors and their contributions to literature. Writers like Isabelle Allende, David Malouf, and Ian McEwan are named in some teachers’ reflections as the “literature of our times” and the “voices that will last”. Other popular writers, for example, Jodi Picoult and J.K. Rowling appear in teacher accounts as authors “who seem literary” but might not last beyond a generation. These teachers’ perspectives are interesting as they suggest that literature is not only defined by what the author intends, but also by what the reader endorses. This is particularly “true” of canonical works in general, as can be seen again through Mark’s reflection:

That’s where the definitions become a bit blurry… Shakespeare’s plays were not written for the, I use the term loosely, for the ‘literati’, Shakespeare’s plays were written for the common people. Dickens’ novels were written for a weekly paper… Popular press for people to read but we’ve turned them into canons of literature if you like, and the test I guess of a canon of literature is that like Shakespeare, it’s still being read today. And take Dickens; whereas Dickens is still being read today a lot of the penny dreadfuls that were written at the same time as Dickens are not being read today so they haven’t endured so, so you know, in a big sense literature is something which endures.

Literature is a subjective territory in which canons are unstable and disputed, dependent upon their reader’s endorsement. Mark’s depiction of the “literati” suggests that there is a critical audience whose endorsement of literary merit is required. Although Mark does not elucidate whose voice counts, his view concurs with some teachers’ reflections that although a literary audience exists, new voices in the field are “the fall of the guillotine” or “the spinning knife” that will see the death of some literatures. References to the “hob knobs of literature”, “the hoity toits” and the “professors of Oxford and Melbourne and so forth”, infer an elitist view of literature. Literature in this sense represents high culture and is validated by those with the literary sensibilities or qualifications to make such judgements. Other teachers suggest, however, that individual “consumers have more power now” through online forums and
bookstores in deciding who makes the best sellers list, and which texts are worthy of being labelled literary. There is also a strong viewpoint, in several teachers’ reflections, that literature should be accessible to a wider audience as it belongs to “the world of readers” and “to all people”. Literature is depicted as an embodiment of the human story – its history, triumphs, joys and failings. As a literary archive it therefore “represents all the possibilities of experience” and “everybody’s stories”. This is evident in Mark’s assertions that Shakespeare’s audience were “common people” and Dickens’ publications were written for “popular press”.

There is a common pattern in teachers’ responses, which highlights that literature relies on reader endorsement, it is how it “speaks to subsequent generations” and “ordinary folks through to the literary critics” that influences whether it remains part of a canon.

In order for literature to be enduring, many teachers suggest there are two important qualities that influence readers. One of these qualities is how the text contributes to the body of human knowledge and experience. Regardless of the setting, genre and form it takes, literature should be “illuminating”, contributing to an understanding of “our present” and future possibilities. Secondly, there should be some kind of literary aesthetic; a symbolic and linguistic representation of profound ideas that enables readers to connect with the beauty, intensity or gravity of the literature. The inspirational nature of the aesthetic is a recurring motif in teachers’ reflections, and for many, what ultimately defines literature. Literary texts, as aesthetic constructions, work in symbolic ways that some teachers see as enabling more profound and pleasurable engagement with ideas. Although teachers’ definitions of literature are challenging to discern, all argue that it essentially embodies an aesthetic art form. Literature is frequently described in artistic metaphors as “the Mona Lisa of texts”, “the Picasso”, “the Master Artisan versus the poor apprentice”, and the canon as “the Sistine Chapel of books”. Whilst a few teachers professed to be self conscious of “sounding pretentious” or “classist”, literature is often depicted within an elitist discourse as a higher cultural art form. Literature is depicted as having an “intentionality” to be literary, to work with imagery, and to capture life in stills that “critics and bibliophiles can continue to find new meaning in”. As an intentional aesthetic it is described as “provoking”, “procuring”, “coercing”, “enticing” and “seducing” readers to find meaning in ways that ordinary texts are unable to elicit. This is particularly evident in Ella’s perspective of literature:

Oh what is Literature? ... I don’t know how to really explain it, but it’s some kind of intentionality of the author that... they don’t need to intend it to be on a text list but they need to have intended it to be some kind, at the risk of sounding pretentious, work of art. That to me is what defines, and what makes something literature in the end.

Ella’s view of the aesthetic encompasses other teachers’ appreciation of the beauty or pleasure
literary texts induce in the reader, elevating literature as a significant cultural art form. She justifies her stance by juxtaposing the literary aesthetic to popular culture mediums, including songs and commercials, suggesting there is an obvious difference between these; one as texts the other as literature. Although Ella’s definition of the aesthetic is elusive, the difference between literature and other texts is one she perceives as integral to her students’ lifelong learning. Ella’s desire for readers to know and understand literature, “to pick it up in the world when they see it”, is akin to other teachers’ claims that “to appreciate literature is to appreciate life”, and “to see lit as the highest art is to know its true meaning”. Their constructions of literature are evangelical, with literature portrayed as an aesthetic representation of human understanding, intended to affect the reader. Defining what literature is can be understood by examining the effect it is intended to procure in the reader. Literature is inherently portrayed as a meaningful art form because of the connections it symbolically forges between reader and texts, allowing for multiple interpretations “across readers, time and place”. The distinguished moments of realisation it provides are portrayed as significant, evident in Ella’s statement she wants her students to know “this piece of writing has been put together to help me connect with my family, or process this kind of emotion if ever I happen to feel it in life”. The transformative appeal of the literary aesthetic is starkly contrasted to the persuasive and popular appeal of other texts discerned by their base intentions “to get me to buy that [or] make me release a certain energy whenever I hear those words”. Both literary and non-literary texts are perceived by teachers as collectively connecting to students’ sense of identity and experience. However, it is the emotive appeal of the aesthetic, the intense and transformative pleasure it entails, that denotes the merit of what is recognisably literature.

Literature, as a metaphorical marriage of ideas and aesthetics is portrayed as possessing that “richness”, which in turn “enriches” readers’ lives. Teachers’ depiction of the “rich interiors” of literary texts is symbolic of an aesthetic, which is seen as personally deepening students’ realisation of human experience as an ongoing narrative, “in which their own stories unfold”. For those teachers’, including Kerrin, Mark, Joy and Grace, who identified as an “avid reader” or “ardent booklover”, this inspiring view of literature is informed by a broader ideological view of literary reading as purposeful and pleasurable. Teachers’ claims, “it would be a poor world without books”, “there’s a wealth of ideas in lit” and “Literature... enriches my life. If it doesn’t enrich then it’s not literature”, elaborates a view of literature as an aesthetic that gratifies and expands the reader’s intense engagement with the world through its imagined possibilities (Sumara, 2002). This transformative appeal of the literary aesthetic is further evident in Grace’s reflection:

So yes it does get down to that richness, it’s a rather pompous way of putting it, but that’s what I mean. Literature to me, and as I said I’m an avid reader, literature to
me is something that enriches my life. If it doesn’t enrich then it’s not literature. I mean, it’s the difference between Mills and Boon and, I don’t know, D.H. Lawrence… one is boring, it’s badly written, doesn’t say anything, you know what’s going to happen in the end anyway, as opposed to something that… drives down through the characters and gives you an insight into how they’re feeling and why they behave like they behave, makes you think about it, has something that you take away with you... it is important to me.

The aesthetic carries meaning in its ability to “drive down through the characters” yielding insight into how characters are “feeling and why they behave like they behave”. Through this close reading of the text that Grace and others describe, the reader’s sense of humane identity is developed and enriched. Literature is portrayed as a civilising aesthetic that conditions society by cultivating sensitivity, cultural appreciation and civilised values in the readers who “come both reluctantly and eagerly to its pages”. Informed by a Leavisite view, the canon is described as an embodiment of “literary culture and art” that has the potential “to transform souls and lives”; the literary aesthetic is valued as an antidote to “young people’s ambivalence” and “rampant hedonism in a consumer world”. However, some teachers are cautious in describing texts as literary simply because the author intended to challenge or stabilise social mores. Some wariness of “the old bards” and “true and tried stories” exist where the moral messages or cultural representations can “no longer be accepted as a mirror of society”. The author’s intentions in this regard are portrayed as less significant to the “real power” of literature, which is how readers can engage and respond to it, and therefore, determine its ideological and artistic merit. This demarcation of Literature as an aesthetic espousing higher cultural and moral value is evident in Grace’s appraisal of it as encompassing “something that you take away with you” in comparison to a non-literary text, denounced by Grace as poorly crafted, predictable and insignificant. Grace’s comparison of the popular appeal of ‘Mills and Boons’ to the enduring appeal of D.H. Lawrence is an extreme comparison other teachers make between ‘Twilight’ and ‘Jane Eyre’, Chick-lit and Shakespeare, and Dr Seuss and Judith Wright. Literary writers, like D.H. Lawrence who examined the dehumanising effects of modernity and rampant industrialization, are praised for their aesthetic integrity and moral brevity. Teachers positively praise writers who “paint pictures with words” and “invite readers to reimagine their lives”, which is reminiscent of Leavis’ praise of Lawrence as among those writers who “are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life” (Leavis, 1948, p. 2). This emphasis on the aesthetic as definitively connected to deeper levels of interpretation and realisation is “what makes literature literary” and “turns books into another world we get to imaginatively move between”.

Literature is not easily defined by deconstructing its textual elements, but rather by the practices
of reading and interpretation the aesthetic provokes. Literature is depicted as a symbolic representation of everyday life much "like a still life", whereas the reader's interpretation is like a "panorama... seeing the story in context of its surrounds". In one sense literary reading "is about understanding and exploring... the meanings that are embodied in texts". Defining literature is concerned with understanding authorial intentions, and recognising how meaning is embedded within the text and made accessible to the reader through interpretation of its language, symbolism and form. However, this idea that the aesthetic carries meaning is only partially true of dynamic relationship teachers portray as existing between reader and text. Additionally literature is about "questioning and forging new meanings, and giving that meaning a voice". The reader's personal engagement with the text and the processes of inquiry she adopts to make sense of its meaning, influence the possibilities and limitations of interpretation. Mary, Joy, Mark and Kerrin espoused a view of language, in which the reader is seen as both conditioned by her engagement with the text and active in interpreting and renegotiating its meaning. This idea is further elucidated in Kerrin’s construction of Literature:

"Literature to me is about understanding and exploring and interpreting the meanings that are embodied in texts... all of the things an author does to create meaning to express the ideas they want to explore... are part of literature. It is a personal response, a personal interpretation... each time your understanding of it grows and it becomes richer... when you engage in discussion and argument... Literature is a mirror. The arts are a mirror of our society... and I talk about literature, music and theatre and dance, and of course art, as actually being a mirror for our society but also often a catalyst for change in that society... Reading through performance, through film, through all of those elements are about us, making us as a society look at ourselves and say "hang on a minute, that's a bit dodgy, no we're cool about that" (chuckle), so it's a reflection of society as much as -- and it's a depiction of society...

That's what it is for me and I think its role in English is enormously important."

Literature is concerned with understanding the symbolic form of the aesthetic, “all of the things an author does to create meaning” and the concepts of the human condition the author intended to explore. However, it is also an evolving mode of inquiry culminating in a personal response to the text, which valorises the reader’s personal response, evident in Kerrin’s assertion “it’s about... your understanding of [what] an author’s meaning is and then engaging in discussion and debate about that with other people”. Literature is repeatedly portrayed in teachers’ reflections as an ethical stimulus that prompts “deep discussion”, “hot debates” and “philosophical conversations”, allowing students to socially negotiate meaning in texts, in ways that are governed by egalitarian principles of tolerance. Sharing insights into literary texts sometimes allows for new meanings to be produced in addition to old readings being critiqued.
and possibly discarded. Whilst Kerrin argues that Literature, like any artistic medium including
dance, film and art is “a mirror of our society”, teachers emphasise the mirror’s reflection is
abstract, making many interpretations possible.

A core theme in teachers’ reflections is a view of literature as more than a benign reflection of
the beautiful aspects of our humanity. Literature is depicted as a “realistic” and “true” mirror
of life, showing the conditions of humanity that are “also often a catalyst for change in that society”. A defining quality of Literature is the evolving sense of social and personal identity
readers develop through engagement with the “darker aspects” of the aesthetic. The power of
metaphors and imagery is depicted as provoking readers’ natural curiosity to deconstruct the
text, which is more “powerfully true” when the narrative is about human conflicts. Some
teachers argue that literature is inherently dark, because it grapples with the conflicts and
themes humanity has “historically struggled to resolve in its nature”. Literature is viewed as
potentially contributing to social change, because students ‘read’ the world through literary
texts. Reading is an ideological and socially constructed interpretive act, in which the literary
merit of the text is partially measured by the intense connection it elicits through the language,
form, and ideas it comprises. Literature in this sense provides historical and contemporary
social lenses that speak to “the imagination of individuals” and to the “collective human
consciousness” of humanity. The enduring significance, and complexity of this relationship
between text and reader is one several teachers shared in ultimately defining the difference
defined in texts and literature. Texts are like a “poor quality negative in which we can’t see our
reflection”, whereas literature is a “mirror that makes us take a hard long look at ourselves”.
There is a moment when a text might “touch our minds” but literature has a transformative
power; “if you’re wanting a big definition of literature, it’s something that stands the test of
time”.

7.2 ISSUES OF TEXT SELECTION

In teachers’ literary constructions of V.C.E. English, text selection is depicted as a fraught
process, but nonetheless one filled with possibilities. The possibility for texts to help students
“thrive”, “minds boggle”, “travel” and “eclipse their limitations” wars with the possibility
that students may likewise be “bored”, “disengaged”, “lost”, or simply “won’t read”. This
binary of hope and hopelessness was a motif in many teachers’ reflections, shaping their
decisions, and infiltrating their discussions in ways reminiscent of McLean Davies’ study where
such binaries ranged “from the naming of individuals, to student engagement, to beliefs about
the cultural capital of canonical texts” (Mclean Davies, 2012, p. 15). Catering for individual
cohorts, especially encouraging students to read, was a theme in many of the teachers’
reflections on what primarily motivates text selection. The time constraints in a year of study
driven “top-down” by the exam underpinned the cautionary tales teachers told of text selection
in an “ideal world” versus the realities of schooling. Text selection is described as encompassing more than “simply choosing books”; it involves complex consideration about accessibility, what viewpoints and understandings count, and an uncertainty about “what examiners are looking for”. In this mainstream English subject, reading a wide variety of texts, with some literary component, is epitomized as a hopeful ideal that is pragmatically undermined by students’ disengagement with reading.

Choosing texts that are accessible, as opposed to culturally, morally and intellectually fulfilling is a “grim reality”, “sting in the tail”, and “the way things are done” as teachers narrate the challenges of teaching “our kids” and “kids like ours”. The teachers’ perceptions of their students’ low motivation as readers and their poor comprehension skills significantly impact on text selection processes. Other demographic factors related to their individual school communities also influence the genres, writers, and materials selected. These factors include whether the school is Government or Christian, urban or rural, multicultural, vocationally oriented, or located in a low-socioeconomic area. Whilst making decisions where literary texts “hit the chopping block” or “are rarely considered” is portrayed as “less than ideal”, doing so is also argued to be “a necessary evil”, and “a realistic yard stick” for student success.

The theme of accessibility is a complex issue underpinning teachers’ talk about text selection. Kerrin’s awareness that many of her students are vocationally oriented (and hence unlikely to be strong readers) conflicts with her desire to see them embrace a love of language and ideas in literary texts. Norah’s concern, or perhaps stereotype, of her students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and literacy inhibit her imagination of how more literary texts might be taught. Joy, Mark and Mary’s roles as school librarians underpin their pragmatic view that young people need wide reading, unfolding in tales they tell about students who love to borrow books from the library. For Grace, her school’s vibrant culture, and her students’ eclectic interests, permit choices that challenge and stimulate her students’ thinking, although there are some, including the “footy boys” and students from non-English speaking backgrounds for whom a language barrier remains. Choosing texts that are accessible is part of a complex consideration of how to balance students’ needs with the curriculum aims, in ways that maximise success, where this is measured by exam performance or entry into a planned pathway.

Texts that are shorter, chronologically structured, and consistent in narrative voice are depicted as more likely to be read. Three main reasons for this are evident in the teachers’ reflections. Firstly, “accessible texts” and “less literary literature” lessen the amount of time students need to invest in reading. Teachers describe this as an inevitable “lowering of the bar” to some degree, but many still value literary merit evident in claims they “select small bite texts, but with lots of bite” and books “with great substance but less text”. Secondly, these accessible genres enable teachers to work realistically within the time constraints of V.C.E. English,
encouraging students to “master” and “get core content and skills under their belts”. Thirdly, they provide more creative and interactive opportunities to work with the text in class, catering for student engagement. Activities like scrap-booking, online blogging; group presentations and other interactive approaches are especially viewed as “creatively catering” for a range of student capabilities and interests.

Engagement is depicted as “the current hype”, “the buzz word” and “core part of 21st century teaching” that is influencing “text selection more and more”. Teachers’ views on engagement include simple considerations of text length and style, and deeper ideological considerations about how gender, culture, themes and settings are represented in these. Disruption, disengagement and low motivation prevail in many of the teachers’ depictions of boys as readers, with these qualities potentially undermining their performance in assessed Outcomes. Selecting texts with strong male protagonists who “have a positive outlook on life and good relationships” is viewed as important alongside appealing narratives that feature “action and adventure”, “solid writing” and “are fairly realistic unless its sci-fi”. Teachers justify accommodating male students by comparing these to girls’ reading habits: “girls will read anything”, “they don’t care if the main character’s a boy”, “and are more likely to be readers anyway”. Stereotypes of girls as “more switched on”, “willing to make the most of things”, and being generally “easier to please”, however, may have meant that in some instances compliance was mistaken for engagement. Selecting texts with settings students can more readily relate to and imagine is considered important in maintaining all students’ interest. Exotic settings, and foreign places where “the world is a different place” are valued by some teachers as “exactly what’s needed in a global age”. Conversely, some worry about how realistic it is to explore foreign cultures and alternative views, when their school is predominantly “middle class and white”, “monocultural” or “located out here miles from city concerns and faces”. A social justice discourse frames these teachers’ views; they value celebrating diversity and culture, however, they also see this as something that must be prioritised in the early years of English where there is time to explore ideas “in-depth and ethically” in order to “impact change”.

In prioritising texts that are accessible, some teachers argue the potential to explore diverse universal themes and perspectives is lost. Ideally, reading a breadth of texts, with a core literary component among these, is part of an ideal teachers’ construct of V.C.E. English. Ella, for example, recognises this issue, emphasising on two occasions that ideally students should study more texts, “eight doesn't seem like many texts over two years”. Stereotypes of “footy boys” and “tradie kids”, and “kids like ours”, reflect the deficit discourses that conflict with teachers’ aims to “open up the world” to students, or “build bridges between [students’] experience and other people”. This lack of engagement is seen as symptomatic of a generation of students
whose reading has gone offline in the world of print and online to social media. Many of the teachers, however, see their professional role as somehow needing to re-engage students as readers. The students are depicted as “travellers”, and “sojourners”, who “need compasses to travel through texts”, relying on their teachers whose responsibility is to “give them the map” and “steer them in the right direction”. Some teachers, particularly Mary, Ewan and Ella, suggest the value of the text selection process is in the professional dialogue it promotes, encouraging teachers to choose more widely and thoughtfully. Whilst accessibility is a reality, studying texts with “rich themes” and “diverse experiences” is viewed as integral to engaging students more deeply beyond the “superficial realms of their limited adolescence”.

In selecting texts there are some genres that are more favoured than others. Genres like poetry are depicted as “challenging” and “a little bit frightening” because of the students’, and in some instances the teachers’, lesser familiarity with poetic form. Interestingly, five of the teachers interviewed were exploring Bruce Dawe’s poetry as part of ‘Identity and Belonging’. The challenge of coming to terms with the complex symbolism, language, grammar and ideas embodied in Dawe’s poetry is evident in their metaphors of students slowly becoming more comfortable “once they were shown the ropes”, “had jumped through hoops”, “overcome obstacles” and “jumped the hurdles”. Although poetry is perceived as challenging, examining how language creates meaning in shorter texts is considered important. Genres like plays and short stories are described in pragmatic terms as “realistic”, “accessible to most kids” and able to “get the job done”. They are also described in ideological ways as “symbolic representations”, “often with a complex subtext” and “frequently quite political”. Studying these alongside novels that allow for greater “explorations of character and theme” are viewed as helping students “witness” the significant ideas that have shaped human history in ways they can reaffirm, challenge and in some cases, possibly contest. In a rapidly changing world teachers like Ella and Norah see the mutability of ideas as important. The world isn’t fixed, nor is the language, ideas or the identities of people within it.

Most teachers suggest there is a place for literature within a general English course, and selecting more “literary literature”, “good lit” and “deeper books” is an integral consideration in text selection processes. Whilst some texts are considered too philosophical, difficult to read and “laborious... it’d kill them off”, there is a general view that literature remains important. This role is quite distinct from the subject Literature, which teachers describe as being for the “real devotees”, “aspiring literati” or “your generally good readers”. In V.C.E. Literature there is an assumption that students are willing and capable of reading diverse literary texts, including those written in and about other times, and in English vernaculars that no longer exist. Deciding what literature is relevant for V.C.E. English, however, is more challenging, as it has to speak to a wider audience who are potentially disinterested, or less familiar with literary
texts. This issue is perceived as “gravely evident” and “sadly present” because the V.C.A.A. authorised text lists are potentially narrow in their scope. This is evident in Joy’s reflection:

I think the English list is pretty ordinary to be quite honest... I think there is a lot of trash in it... I think some of it is maybe pandering to (and I suppose this is necessary)... to an audience that is not used to reading your literary work... literature in terms of what they read has got to be really strong and solid and it's really got to earn its place there... And I know we have very mixed ability cohort and... our kids come from such variety of backgrounds and I don't mean just socio-economic or cultural or linguistic... It is the whole thing! They come from a whole variety of backgrounds more now than they ever have... it is pretty much our society and our kids.

Words like “pandering” in Joy’s depictions are akin to descriptions some of the other teachers use to describe a “dumbing down”, “dilution” and “watering down” of literary content in V.C.E. English. There is an assumption in Joy’s account that those responsible for creating V.C.A.A. text lists possibly view students enrolled in V.C.E. English as less inclined to be readers of literary materials than those enrolled in V.C.E. Literature. Whilst some teachers suggest there is a genuine difference between student cohorts, others express concern that the absence of “good books”, “quality lit” and “the big reads” disadvantages the more talented students who study mainstream English, particularly in rural areas where subjects don’t always run. The absence of literature is described in negative metaphors as “a cultural wasteland” and “a barren landscape... in which nothing grows: certainly not kids’ minds”. Inevitably some literature is seen as too challenging for the majority of students, with Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales’ and Shakespeare’s histories among examples given. However, V.C.E. English is envisioned as a site, which through text selection, must cater for society’s needs. Joy’s image of “our society, our kids” as linguistically, culturally and academically diverse, represents a common theme in teachers’ reflections. Literature, as a collection of diverse narratives, is seen as valuable in English, because it has the potential to connect with students’ lives. However, the place of literature is a tenuous one, evident in claims “it must earn its place”, “earn its stripes” or “really be worth the battle” to be worthy of the V.C.A.A. text list, and more importantly among the texts set for their students’ reading.

Some of the teachers’ frustration with the V.C.A.A. text list emanates from a general dissatisfaction with the themes, trends and “popular fads” they see as limiting their autonomy to genuinely inspire and cater for students. The V.C.A.A. publishes a list of selected works including novels, short stories, plays, poetry, autobiographies and multimodal texts from which teachers of V.C.E. English make their selections. Two texts are chosen for Reading and Responding, and two for Creating and Presenting. At least one text is required to be Australian,
and only one film is permitted (note; since these teachers were interviewed, multimodal texts have been added to the list). Whilst Goodwyn (2012) suggests teachers in Australia have greater autonomy in processes of text selection than their overseas counterparts, motifs of feeling “bound up”, “hands tied”, “befuddled”, and “dismayed” reflect their feelings of being imposed upon, constrained and limited by the texts offerings. A pertinent theme in teachers’ discussions of text lists is a moral trepidation about the political subject matter often encompassed in what is offered. In one sense exposing students to issues of society, culture and identity is portrayed as a “necessary moral barometer” or “ethical compass”. Informed by humanist discourses, most teachers affirmed the study of literature and other texts in promoting egalitarianism, tolerance and cultural empathy. Addressing the “big issues” and/or “injustices” of the 20th century and recent times, was seen by some as what makes senior English unique as a school subject and real-life preparation for adulthood. Reading literary texts and substantial fiction is an act through which students “grapple with”, “wrestle with”, “usurp” and “protest against” corruption, injustice, poverty, unsustainable industry and political control, helping students “right the world”, “change the planet” and “be all they can be”. Whilst this is portrayed as a noble ambition, there was also concern among some teachers that text lists can become overly politicised, responding to political trends or whims. This was evident across all interviews as teachers invariably depicted the English classroom as a microcosm of social and government action: English is “the backbone of schools”, and “the place where if it’s big you have to put it in”.

Whilst most teachers accepted the inevitability of some themes and issues being “naturally” or “historically” represented in the V.C.A.A. text lists, there were feelings of discontent among teachers who saw political aims as subjugating pleasure, joy and engagement. Several teachers, including Grace and Joy who work as Assessors, portrayed the V.C.A.A. text list panellists, “the powers that be”, and “the master puppeteers”, as having particular agendas that narrow text choices. Repeated comments that the literary texts selected “are all sadness and sorrow”; “grief and despair” and “death, death and more death” are connected to teachers’ perceptions that V.C.E. English deliberately reflects current political debates, including asylum seekers, Australia’s involvement in Islamic countries and more positive moves toward Indigenous Reconciliation. There is a common theme in teachers’ reflections that argues “a return to some beauty is needed”, “a bit of frippery would be good” and “occasionally a bit of happiness”. Some literary “lightweights” – Jane Austen among these – are perceived as gratifying a human need for beauty. The perceived gravity of the text list is heightened some suggest because it is “classically heavy” and traditionally literature is seen by these teachers as often dealing with issues that are dark and serious. Some of these ideas are evident in Grace’s reflection:
I think if you look at the text list... it is set by people who have particular agendas and you are never going to get away from that but the breadth is not there. The agenda is leaning much more towards highly academic classics and not looking for the student engagement so much as though we should all do Shakespeare and we should all know about ‘Nineteen Eighty Four’, even Hemingway (Spoken in a posh tone). Some of the modern ones they put like 'Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time', which is one that I like – it is a gorgeous book, but it doesn’t work very well as a good text though, and there is a difference between a good book and a good text... and I think the other thing is we have always had... one Aboriginal text, one Jewish text or one Holocaust text of that sort, a classic, usually a Shakespeare, and some poetry, which is still there... The Jewish book seems to have gone and I think it would have been good to have a book like ‘My Name is Usher Lev’ or ‘The Chosen’ by Potok... For a lot of them [students] it is not a world they are familiar with... And it engages them... Then you've got the argument about how they need to know about history... but to me that is English in a nutshell – it is a melting pot... And it is the one subject where we are allowed to be a melting pot... We are allowed to look and blend... There is a freedom.

Grace’s perception that the V.C.A.A. agenda subjugates engagement in favour of “highly academic classics” represents a core idea in teachers’ comments. The V.C.A.A. panel is described by some teachers as “elitist”, “classist” and “out of touch”, with some expressing “outrage” and “incredulity” that V.C.E. English texts lists are becoming “a rehash”, and “re-write” of the V.C.E. Literature lists in recent years. Whilst some teachers, particularly Joy and Kerrin who teach V.C.E. Literature, argue in favour of literary texts, “especially Austen”, “Shakespeare’s comedies” and “other literary lightweights” there is a backlash among some teachers toward heavier academic classics, which they see as standing in opposition to student engagement. This binary between “thick lit” and apparent “lite lit” is prevalent throughout teachers’ responses. The highly academic classics are perceived as inherently dark, often cathartic as opposed to hopeful; densely written, and reliant on the reader’s knowledge of historical events, people and places. The narration, perspective, style and setting of some classics are perceived as also “immediately alienating”, “too much to process” and “outside the interest of most contemporary readers”. Creating a balance between modern voices, multimodal texts and “lovely literature” is seen as resolving this predicament, allowing for literary merit without supressing students’ engagement and pleasure.

Although the political agenda of text selection is fraught with tension, Joy, Kerrin, Mark, Grace and Norah accept that some cultural voices and stories are favoured over others, and sometimes “like with Aboriginal texts” this can be a positive change. Cultural politics are seen as
informing text selection, evident in Grace’s assertion “we have always had … one Aboriginal text, one Jewish text” and other teachers’ depictions of the “usual suspects” as being Indigenous literature and Islamic texts in recent times. Some texts in contrast are seen as “going in and out of fashion” and “going in waves”, encompassing classic Australian texts concerned with postcolonial identity, and English and European texts dealing with war, poverty, civil unrest and the search for humanity in hostile times. The nature of these text lists is generally viewed as predictable – “they replace like for like”, “you know what comes next”, “‘Pride and Prejudice’ goes and ‘Sense and Sensibility’ returns again, and again”. Teachers likewise make ideological assertions that some literatures “should be”, “have the right to be” or “deserve an honorary place in society”. Grace’s comments that she would like to see the return of the “Jewish book” is similar to other teachers’ statements they would like to see “more Indigenous writers”, “something culturally different like Persian poetry”, “less Asian texts” and “Islamic stories that surely must exist that aren’t just about war and abuse”.

Deliberately and sensitively working with marginalised narratives is seen by a few teachers as a positive signifier of 21st century Englishes, which have the potential to ensure negative cultural myths are not “dangerously reproduced”, or “mistaken for truth”. In order to ideologically achieve this aim, several teachers argue it is important to select texts that explore the lives of ordinary people in extraordinary times, or grapple with contemporary issues. Text selection, informed by an ethos that values students’ personal growth, is seen as a moral and ethical enterprise in which “we are not selecting books, so much as selecting experiences”. Exploring foreign landscapes, contested issues and significant moments in time encourages students to critically and creatively imagine “how life might be lived differently”. Texts are described as enriching students’ “sense of the world”, and “awakening their social conscience” in a subject described as a “melting pot”, which emancipates its inhabitants from fixed worldviews. This image of V.C.E. English as liberation and freedom informs many of the teachers’ ideals of what texts should be studied, who should be represented in these, and what global understandings might be gained. Reading the “everyday tales” and “stories of the common people” depicted as “often misrepresented” or silenced in texts is particularly valued. A core belief in teachers’ responses is the idea that young people are more inspired by stories of ordinary individuals dealing with conflict, relationships, love, grief and hope. By working sensitively and justly with these voices, students’ own “ethical values are realised” and their “empathy elicited”, contributing to a democratic ideal. Teachers prioritise choosing texts, in consideration of those already studied in Years 7-10, that will contribute to students’ ongoing social, cultural, and intellectual growth. Text selection is shown to be a “balancing act” demanding negotiation and forward thinking about how narratives inform social perspectives.
The pursuit of humane culture and democratic ideals is a prominent motif in teachers’ reflections. Decisions about text selection are informed by socio-cultural sensitivities about whose stories are represented and lost, particularly if more recent texts are neglected in favour of “the golden oldies”, “the albeit greats” that are seen as often “being recycled” or “returning time and time again” to the lists. A general pattern in teachers’ reflections is a particular emphasis on the importance of understanding indigenous perspectives. Studying more recent indigenous texts, and re-examining Australian classics in view of postmodern perspectives, is considered an integral part of English education in Australia. Statements about overcoming "a culture of out of sight, out of mind”, “what was accepted a generation or two ago”, and “taking affirmative action” reflected ethical and egalitarian discourses of emancipation and empowerment. An ethos of cultural tolerance and empathy are central tenets of the kinds of democracy many of these teachers imagine. In order to appreciate and understand the global context, particularly its diversities and inequities, some argue that teachers have a responsibility to choose texts that are “eye opening”, and “not sugar coated” yet also “celebrate what it means to be human” and “appeal to our better selves”. Ensuring students are exposed to a breadth of stories: the tragedies of the human condition and also the better qualities of human nature, is another “balancing act” teachers prioritise. Preparing students to be diplomats, entrepreneurs and innovators: the “movers and groovers”, and the “makers and shakers” is reliant on students knowing other stories and confidently producing their own. Students are portrayed as cartographers of the greater unknown; an adventure that will require hopeful imagining as much as experiencing more grim realities. This inevitably impacts on text selection. The creativity to imagine and embrace the future is depicted as partially dependent on students experiencing the scope of universal themes in literary and non-literary texts.

Texts that encompass hopeful themes and focus on “the lighter side” and “trivial realities” of the human condition are portrayed as dangerously under-represented in V.C.A.A. text lists and consequently, what their students study. Whilst Mark, Grace, Mary and Kerrin saw the potential for literary texts to appeal to young people’s sense of beauty, spirituality, culture and intellect with the “right approach”, and “enough time to break down barriers”, canonical literary works, including those of postcolonial Australia, were perceived as challenging to teach. There is an apparent contradiction between some teachers’ belief in the transformative power of literature and a simultaneous concern that more balance is needed. Some teachers hesitated in selecting classic literature, suggesting the darker nature of literary texts would further disengage students alienated by the language, aesthetics and density of works already foreign to them as readers. Binaries of “good literature” and “bad books” and “gloomy literature” and “happy texts” occur throughout teachers’ depictions of the kinds of texts they want their students to experience. An example of these binaries is apparent in Grace’s account:
We’ve got to find books that capture their imagination that they don’t all roll their eyes at every time we walk into class and say what we’re going to do. I’m tutoring a young man … and next year he is studying ‘A Farewell to Arms’ and ‘The Reluctant Fundamentalist’... two such gloomy books and… one thing for me is that we need balance, and one of things that that current list of text gives you is lots of opportunities for balance… you take something like ‘Pride and Prejudice’, which I’m apparently teaching next year and you couldn't possibly call that gloomy. Sometimes people associate gloominess with importance... I mean we are doing ‘Year of Wonders’, which is about a plague but I don't regard it as a gloomy book in lots of ways. There's lots of points to it. Edgar Allan Poe is gloomy, ‘Maestro’ is gloomy... ‘Cosi’? It’s not gloomy.

The repeated motif of “gloomy” literature in teachers’ reflections contrast with the values they want their students to leave V.C.E. English with, including a sense of hope in the future, and a belief in humanity’s potential goodness. Whilst Grace argues there are “lots of opportunities for balance”, many saw texts lists as more realistically “all about death and darkness”, contributing to a worldview that is pessimistic, narrow and without the potential for joy. Many criticised a view of literature they saw as dangerously shaping English, which is epitomised in Grace’s comment “sometimes people associate gloominess with importance”. The dark imagery in teachers’ accounts of “black books”, “grim texts” and “the depressingly literati” emphasises the absence of pleasure and hope they see English as needing to inspire. Literature, referred to as “literary literature”, “good literature”, and “the canon” is perceived as inevitably bound to explorations of dark subject matter. Whilst teachers portray topics, including war, death, abuse, loss and other tragedies as “part of the fabric” and the “universal stuff” of human experience, too much emphasis on these “comes at a loss”. To read for enjoyment, to know there is beauty in the world and to see the artful ways language can be used to tell stories are the kinds of experiences these teachers value. Ironically, many also justified the relevance of darker reading material for the unit on Reading and Responding. Reading for meaning is portrayed as a sophisticated skill, utilising complex understandings of how context, author, theme, character and structure interact when exploring texts and ideas. The content of darker, heavier texts were seen as more substantial and complex, and the language more “articulate”, “conversant” or “aesthetically powerful”. In contrast, texts dealing with “brighter stuff” and “happier things” were represented as less intellectual, focusing on inspirational journeys, hopeful endings, “Victorian tea parties” and “Regency fripperies”. Whilst texts dealing with lighter subject matter were portrayed as less controversial and less serious, some teachers including Mary, Grace and Norah highly valued the roles these play in inspiring young readers. Choosing ‘lighter’ stories with moments of comic relief, a cathartic
ending, a tender relationship, a love story and likeable characters were common elements teachers saw as contributing to reader’s personal growth and engagement as readers.

Despite the pressures of text selection, and the discussions that can “descend into a figurative brawl”, “hot debates”, becoming “tantamount to a circus ring”, there is a hopeful, and enthusiastic tone to teachers’ visions of what their decisions might engender. The eight texts students will read and view across the two years of V.C.E. English is seen as possibly inspiring them to “dream”, “imagine new realities”, “experience culture” and to develop “a love of books” and “the beauty of language”. This romantic discourse reflects the importance teachers attach to selecting literary texts alongside other fiction, which develop students’ appreciation for the real world beyond its pages. Ensuring students experience texts that celebrate humanity as opposed to “universal despair”, “dejection” and “obsessive dystopia” is highly valued in “building” and “constructing” the future. The ability for students to empathetically identify with others, reconstruct one’s identity and reimagine industry and society are partially scaffolded through the texts they read. Selecting literary texts with “enduring”, “philosophical” and “universal themes relevant to their past, present and future lives”, is a priority; although selections shouldn’t be “classic heavy”, or “exactly what you’d choose for English Lit”. Studying the “old vanguards” is enriched by the presence of modern songwriter/poets like Paul Kelly and novelists like David Malouf who advance society’s understanding of family, identity, human ingenuity, and relationships in rapidly changing times.

7.3 SUMMARY

Chapter Seven addressed a core area of concern in the research: how literature is perceived and represented in text selection by this group of V.C.E. English teachers. The teachers describe literature in a myriad of ways, primarily encompassing definitions of its aesthetic as a form of art and mirror of society’s better attributes. Literature is also described in terms of its transformative appeal, which through an authentic “experiential, aesthetic and affective encounter has personal significance to readers” (Goodwyn, 2012, p. 213). The language of literary texts and the themes they encompass are depicted as having the capacity to spiritually, culturally and philosophically broaden students’ understanding of themselves and the world. While some teachers, including Mary and Kerrin, describe literature in terms of the experience of joy and beauty it evokes in the reader, others like Mark and Ewan describe literature in terms of its gravity. Literature has a seriousness that contributes to its enduring relevance, stemming from the grim and dark realities it is often open to exposing, questioning and provoking.

Ultimately, the aesthetic, linguistic and thought-provoking dimensions of literature underpin the reasons teachers value its place in English; a general subject “taking all comers”. However, teachers’ perceptions of students’ capacities to deal with “literary literature”, understood by
these teachers as something separate to other fictions, means they have concerns about accessibility and literacy that constrain their choice of texts. Furthermore, there are themes of discord and tension around the V.C.A.A. text selection list. Grace, Mary and Joy expressed a desire for greater autonomy, dismayed by the political agendas governing text selections. Mary, Ella, Grace and Joy also expressed concern that the literary offerings are too grim for a democratic and troubled global age that should encourage hope. Collectively, they depicted a cultural, spiritual and democratic capital associated with the study of literature. Issues related to reader engagement, self-discovery, ethics and social justice, and an appreciation of literature were influential in text selection processes (McLean Davies, 2012).

Chapter Eight further explores the literary discourses associated with teachers’ constructions of literature and literary practice in V.C.E. English. The chapter explores two significant aspects of literary practice in English: the acts of reading and responding to texts. The capacity to broaden students’ cultural, philosophical and aesthetic understandings is important to these teachers, evident in the ways of knowing and responding that are valued in their discussions of English.
CHAPTER EIGHT

LITERARY PRACTICES: READING, WRITING, KNOWING AND RESPONDING

8.0 INTRODUCTION

Historically the place of reading and writing, particularly the more literary aspects of these has been a source of contestation, change and evolution in the English subjects overseas and in Australia. The revised V.C.E. English course implemented in Victoria in 2007-2008 represented one such change in which teachers were asked to work with literary and film texts in two distinct ways. Area of Study One titled Reading and Responding was concerned with the world of the text: its themes, characters and concerns. Analytical approaches to reading and responding were perceived as similar to what had happened in the past, and for some of the teachers there was little recognition of the subtle shifts in the Design, such as a greater emphasis on authorial intentions and the deliberate construction of the text.

The second Area of Study titled Creating and Presenting, however, was depicted by the teachers as a source of consternation as they “fumbled in the dark”, to understand how to use the text as a filter for understanding the Contexts of ‘Whose Reality’, ‘The Imaginative Landscape’, ‘Encountering Conflict’, and ‘Identity and Belonging’. Discerning how to perform a reading of the text so that it became a ‘springboard’ into creative, persuasive and expository modes of writing represented a distinct move away from the interior construction of the text toward the creation of informed writing.

Chapter Eight is an exploration of the teachers’ understandings of what constitutes approaches to reading and writing in V.C.E. English, and examines more closely their constructions of literary practices within the subject. The discussion illuminates the findings in relation to the research question, how do teachers discursively adopt, challenge, or oppose debates about reading and literature? Furthermore, the discussion highlights common themes and discordant tensions in their perceptions of literature, text and response. I was cognisant that I was asking teachers to reflect on the role of literature and texts in a senior English course at a time when they were jostling with notions of what constituted text response, reading and writing. The question of how teachers ideologically construct literary versions of V.C.E. English extends beyond considerations of how literature is defined and represented through text selection, to a broader conceptualisation of approaches to reading and writing that are valued. While some teachers were determined to work with texts in new ways, others sought familiarity, creating a nuanced view of the different ways literary practice is constructed. The metaphors, ideals and imagery within their reflections, however, reveal common themes. The teachers’ responses particularly reveal complex understandings of V.C.E. English: its contestations, challenges and
perceived norms. From passion to critique, from appreciation to theoretical understanding, reading and text analysis are framed as fundamental elements of English and the source of its richness, joy and relevance.

8.1 PLEASURE, PASSION AND CRITIQUE

Reading for pleasure is valued by many of the teachers as leading students to a deeper, personal experience of self-fulfilment, which has been sacrificed to some degree by critical agendas in English. Teachers, particularly Mary and Mark, talk of past literary traditions in nostalgic terms, creating fable-like constructions of English in which reading for pleasure, for “sheer beauty” and the “richness of the English language” are historically valued within education. There is an aspirational tone in their depictions of a great literary tradition, which resonate with Cultural Heritage perspectives promoted by Arnold and later reinvigorated by Leavis. The reading of canon – “great literature”, “the masters”, “the big guns”, and “the classics” – and literary practices of recitation and creative composition are represented as the enlightened past. Furthermore, these creative skills in which students “mirror” the author’s aesthetic and voice, are portrayed by Joy, Mary, Mark and Kerrin as “valuable”, a “lost art”, “diminishing skill” and “forgotten craft”. These passionate claims are consistent with Goodwyn’s (2012) observation that ‘literary reading’ remains valued in 21st century secondary English subjects as “an experience with quite remarkable qualities and benefits for those who genuinely engage with it” (p. 214).

The contemporary landscape is one in which passion and pleasure are depicted as in competition to practices of critique and theoretical perspectives, an opposition some suggest is reinforced by the assessment regime in V.C.E. English. Finding a balance through which critical perspective and the aesthetic appreciation of literature can “abide”, “co-habitate” and “live without conflict” is an agenda underpinning teachers’ perspectives.

The majority of teachers express a view of pleasure, passion and critique as somehow possible if students can understand the richness of the aesthetic. Understanding how ideas are represented through authorial decisions about language, style and form makes it possible for readers to share in meaning, and respond using similar structures and “tools of language”. By balancing critical and creative approaches to the aesthetic English is enriched, and open to encountering realms of human possibility (Misson & Morgan, 2006). This is particularly evident in teachers’ reflections on canonical texts, and poetry. Understanding how the esoteric beauty in poetry, for example, is created through rhythms and nuances of metaphor is portrayed as enriching students’ critical appreciation without jeopardising their youthful desire for pleasure and fulfilment. Some teachers compared critical encounters with the aesthetic as similar to the wonder of childhood reading. Understanding the rhyming scheme in Mem Fox’s
'Possum Magic', for example, rather than detracting from the experience of joy can enrich the child’s capacity to memorise favourite parts, predict rhymes and along the way cultivate an appreciation for Australian wildlife. Intertwining both critical and creative approaches is seen too as gratifying the reader’s desire to discover new meaning and imaginatively experience new cultures. Critique enables the reader to move beyond emotively revelling in the text’s aesthetic beauty to understanding and questioning how meaning is made possible.

These teachers particularly valorise developing students’ capacity to articulate and eloquently express ideas as a primary motive for literary study. Students are portrayed as intuitively participating in a form of sociality whereby they come to know the language, structures and metaphors through which human experience is articulated. Several teachers portray the “art of expression” as a diminishing skill jeopardised by the abrupt communicative demands of a global and virtual environment, internally felt by schools. Providing opportunities for students to immerse themselves in reading is valorised, appearing as a recurring theme in teachers’ argument about why reading matters in general. Whilst literature is favoured over non-literary genres as a passionate encounter with language and ideas, teachers who identified as avid readers also emphasised that reading for pleasure is not limited to literature, and nor should it be.

The teachers in this study expressed different views as to whether literature should be a central focus in senior English; however, many argued it has an important role in creating a humane, democratic society. Consistent with Sawyer’s (2006) assertions literary and language practices were represented as intertwined with other moral and political practices in shaping humane society (Sawyer, 2006). Teachers spoke of “finding a way to be in the world together”. Metaphors of literature as a “bridge”, “springboard” and “platform” emphasised a view of literature as a moralising force and purveyor of civilised values. Reading literature is depicted as cultivating a real life joy and ongoing engagement with the conversations and ideas that “make up the world”, “celebrate diversity” and “make being human an intellectual experience for mind and soul”. The motif of living in a “global village” was particularly significant, representing how teachers viewed globalization: as an ethical, relational way of living in a global community. Indeed, a prominent theme in teachers’ reflections was how English does, and might in other ways, contribute to a knowledge-based society. In order for human ingenuity to flourish, their responses suggest, there needs to be a distinct understanding of what globalization really means beyond the neo-liberal competitive market, and greater understanding of how teachers are already working toward such aims. The English subjects are represented in various reflections as facilitating a global shift in creating critically literate, innovative and humane citizens working collaboratively, despite their individual and cultural differences. Creating a ‘microcosm’ of the global village in English classrooms, supported in
part though literary engagement, was constructed by several teachers as essential in expanding “their [readers] imagined world of possibilities” (Sumara, 2002 p. xiii).

The concept of ‘literary sociability’ is evident in these teachers’ reflections as they grapple with opening the possibilities of exploring local and global ideas in texts against a culture of standardised assessment regimes (McLean Davies et al., 2013). The demands of up-skilling young people to be functionally literate consumers are juxtaposed to more complex views of becoming critically, creatively and culturally literate. Literature is afforded a particular significance and relevance by these teachers as providing a “passionate”, “pleasurable” and “heartfelt” encounter with the “real world” of lived experience. Images of literature as “expanding the world”, “opening up” and “broadening students horizons” are recurring patterns in teachers’ stories of English. Literary works composed by authors from different backgrounds and across time are depicted as “time capsules”, “archives”, and “treasuries” of lived human experience that through close reading and personal engagement the reader shares in experiencing too. Literature in this sense encourages readers to inhabit the imaginative landscape and in doing so profoundly shapes their understanding of themselves, their connections with others, and the world.

The implications of advancing technologies, environmental sustainability and trans-national movements of people, are issues central to globalization (Singh & Han, 2006). These issues, to varying degrees, are implicit in teachers’ reflections on the types of literary and non-literary reading valued: texts concerned with issues of sustainability, human ethics and tolerance, and literature from Australia and other cultures. Preparing students to contribute “effectively”, and “productively” in society – language associated with neo-liberalist rhetoric – is conceptualised differently by these teachers. Productivity is more than meeting the operative demands of a global market; it is represented as a way of being in society underpinned by values of tolerance and egalitarian diversity. Close reading and engagement with literature, alongside other non-literary texts, contributes to an awakening of moral conscience and an active awareness of the ethical dilemmas pertinent to human experience. This in turn translates into 21st century capacities these teachers predict are needed: to problem solve issues like sustainability, create and work in careers not yet developed, and live “hopefully” and “optimistically” in global communities committed to tolerance and justice.

Reading practices are inferential, engaging the reader in a complex process of meaning-making in which the views and values of the text, and the language used to encapsulate these are perceived as inevitably ideological. The relationship between reader and text is one many teachers, particularly Mary, Kerrin and Grace, portray as an “intellectual conversation”, “a silent sharing of ideas” and a “powerful dialogue with the world” through which educational outcomes are met, literary and cultural perspectives are developed and individual growth is
realised. Teachers value the role of literature and inquiry in allowing students to intellectually consider ideas and in turn, learn how to respond to these. Literature is therefore, depicted as both “purposeful for its own sake” as an aesthetic experience, and as “a purposeful pursuit in opening up the world… to discovery”. The teachers who saw themselves as passionate readers particularly emphasised the merit of literary approaches to reading, which encourage both critique and thoughtful consideration of literature’s aesthetic influence. Literary approaches to reading are portrayed in celestial metaphors as helping students see “the universes you can’t see with the naked eye”, “reach for the stars as readers and writers themselves” and to know “that the world isn’t flat, its round with possibilities”. As self-proclaimed "traditionalists", “avid readers”, “book worms” and “lit lover(s)”, these teachers valorise aspects of V.C.E. English such as text and response as promoting academic scholarship, whilst reinforcing to students that aesthetic forms are still relevant and meaningful to modern readers. Exposing young people to quality writing and informed ideas, and enabling class discussion around these concepts and ideas is particularly valorised. Reading is portrayed as an active encounter between reader and text, that V.C.E. English has the capacity to contribute to, encouraging students to become “discerning readers” of text and culture. Some of these key themes are evident in Mark’s reflection:

I think reading... is good for them to do... in their general reading to be able to appreciate good writing and good character development... study the Masters in a sense in English and the classics rather than what is the current flavour of the month... because they are people whose expertise is acknowledged and so then students are studying people who knew how to write and how to create characters, and knew how to develop plots and things like that. So... I think it is important that kids learn those concepts so that when they pick up a novel to read they can say, well, that is a storyline here but there is no plot and characters are poorly written, so they become discerning readers as well, because there is so much pulp fiction out there you know that it is bit hard to persuade them away from it sometimes... You’ve got to be able to go back and look at stuff which is being written well, which has content and planning within it rather than just... some sort of excitement factor in it.

Mark’s depiction of quality writing draws a clear distinction between what he deems as texts written for "some sort of excitement factor” and others that represent "good writing and good character development”. Developing their students’ appreciation of literary texts is considered by many teachers to be an important part of V.C.E. English as the culmination of reading experiences that will resonate with them into adult life. Knowing what constitutes good writing is perceived as somehow developing students’ own capacities to articulate complex ideas,
evident in teachers’ depiction that “becoming an author is first about learning how to read”, and “knowing what you want to say, means knowing how others see it and say it first”. Mark’s viewpoint is similar to some in the study who suggest that reading in V.C.E. English has to be distinct from the experiences young people encounter in their daily lives. Whilst there is a need for English to be inclusive, Kerrin, Mary and Ewan propose it must inherently provide opportunities for sustained and meaningful reading. Mark’s depiction of a world saturated by “pulp fiction” echoes other sentiments that without a serious approach to texts in English, students might only encounter “pop-fiction”, “chick-lit” and the “latest trends and fads”, depicted as “stealing”, “robbing” and “depriving” them of a world of language and ideas they need to know how to read and respond to. In order to contribute to life in a “global village”, in a way that is socially just and borne of hope and ingenuity, the world beyond the text must be questioned. Literary approaches to reading are perceived as creating a unique opportunity to explore and challenge the world, to see all ideas as a construction of power, people and perspectives. Through reading, Mark suggests, students develop understanding of “what influence society has on them” and further develop the skills to “counter it if they need to”.

Literature is valued as culturally and socially representing the aesthetic, stimulating the reader’s curiosity about the world and the ways in which the human condition can be conceived of and re-imagined. From Shakespeare to Dickens, from Malouf to Dawe, literary approaches to reading are perceived as possessing a humanising appeal. The students’ experience of reading classical texts is portrayed as an inspirational encounter between the “literary master”, or “master artisan” and “the apprentice”, who grows in understanding and skill. Literature, constructed as a moralising force of high culture, is bound to ideals of students learning how to master the art of communication and expression. Teachers’ depictions of reading experiences that invite students to be “literary detectives” and “young explorers of ideas” are portrayed as central to the “rigour” and “intellectual capital” of V.C.E. English. The pleasure and engagement students find in reading “good writing”, “literary lit” and “lovely literature” transforms their understanding of themselves and readies them for participation in future life. The motif of English as a “melting pot”, “a cauldron” and a “mixing bowl” occurs throughout teachers’ reflections, encompassing a view of V.C.E. English as an intellectual space where students are free to inhabit their own and alternative ideas. Critiquing how language is employed by others to describe, diarise, persuade and manipulate is seen as potentially inspiring students to become passionate authors and writers themselves, “even if its just tweeting”. Teachers depict their students’ interests and future aspirations as diverse, with some seeking the immediate monetary rewards of work, many wanting to travel, and some filled with an altruistic desire to contribute to the community. The teaching of reading writing is seen as forward-looking, intended to ensure those students with global and community aspirations are “able to think... no matter what [they] do”. For these teachers, the relationship they form with their
students is important in creating an environment that promotes deep reading and discussion of ideas. Teaching students to read is about teaching them to think creatively and critically about themselves and the world in which they exist. Their accounts are characterised by a depiction of their role as “mentors”, and “adult guides” who help students to critically and openly search for existing ideas and new meanings in the world of texts. Some of these ideas are exemplified in Grace’s reflection:

Teaching is about the relationships... and the ability to get them to go with me wherever I am going... It is important that you select content that resonates with your cohort... it doesn't have to be instant but it has to be by the end of the time that you taught it that they understand and like what it is. I often say to my kids the texts that I have struggled with the most are often the ones that I love the most in the end... I maintain the attitude of 'yes you can do it!'... You have to know who you are teaching and you have to have a moderate understanding of their interests and then be able to present stuff that is meaningful to them... Getting the kids to understand what they are doing is, for them I think, one of the big keys... skills... skills... being able to think is important no matter what you do. Being able to avoid being duped... is one of the skills that English should teach, and it does, and it is only by understanding your world you can avoid being fooled... I don't care what texts I teach in a lot of ways as long as they are going to work for the kids.

Grace suggests that reading and understanding the deeper ideas in texts can be a challenge for students, alluded to in an earlier comment “it doesn't work 100% of the time but I need enough success ... to make it work “. Grace’s story is one about a symbolic journey in which she is cast as the leader, the one who has “the ability to get them to go with me wherever I am going”. Teachers’ stories are predominantly evangelical in their style of narration, with the V.C.E. English teacher successfully overcoming her students’ resistance and lack of understanding. Encouraging students to critically read and experiment with texts in sophisticated ways is depicted as a goal that leads to mutual feelings of self-fulfilment, and accomplishment. If the teacher is the evangelist, then the text is the vehicle through which the world is opened up to her students for scrutiny. The imagery of struggling and grappling with texts, which occur throughout teachers’ reflections, is valorised as empowering students to conceptually understand the ideas these embody.

Engaging with students, assisting them to make connections between the text and their own interests, is valued as a reading process that will remain “meaningful to them” into their adult lives. Informed by discourses associated with growth pedagogy, the teaching of “reading for meaning” is a source of personal challenge, through which students reach some kind of self-understanding. This realisation of self, however, is also depicted as part of a pragmatic aim to
up-skill students as readers, evident in Grace’s repetition of “skills, skills, skills”. The ability to read and to think about the concepts within texts is equated to successfully “diluting the danger” and “watering down the bottle” of ignorance that would otherwise prevail in a society where ideas and culture are devalued. In Grace’s view V.C.E. English has a primary responsibility to ensure students have the skills to “avoid being duped”, an idea repeated in some teachers’ reflections that it’s about “the getting of wisdom”, “coming of age” and realising the “world is built upon ideas and language”. In this sense teaching literary texts is valued as ‘reading’ the world, assuming that the teachers’ perspective holds true; that the external world is accessible and visible through the text.

8.2 WAYS OF KNOWING – THEORY AND PRACTICE

The teachers’ views on text response in V.C.E. English reveal particular ways of ‘knowing’, which are valorised in reading and responding to literary texts. These ways of interpreting and reading texts are evident through reoccurring motifs in the teachers’ reflections, highlighting their core concerns regarding the nature of reading in a world, and classroom environment, moving away from traditional print based literacy and conventional literary forms. To “see beyond the looking glass”, “know what’s beyond the page”, and “find the author’s hand” and “see the puppet strings... that hold the text together” is about ideologically understanding how meaning is made. A view of the text, particularly literature, as embodying a cultural heritage of established themes and ideas, was framed by many as significant, and necessary as part of a “balanced” approach to reading in an increasingly multimedia driven climate. Developing students’ comprehension skills and critical reading of literature, was emphasised as “a critical enterprise”, “the analytical endeavour” and “core business”, of theoretical approaches to reading aimed at deepening students’ appreciation of language and meaning in a world of semiotics. These literary claims resonate with Holbrook’s (2013) perspective on the indelible link between language and agency, suggesting “to bring new notions, new values, new feelings into the world is to... come up with new ways of expressing them” (p. 81). However, whilst theoretically exploring the “landscapes”, “territories” and “borders of texts” is valorised, explicitly working with literary theories and perspectives emerged as contentious, with teachers adopting positions somewhere on a continuum between outright rejection and affirmation of these.

Reading consciously for deeper meaning, and not simply for comprehension of basic textual elements: plot, structure, setting, character and themes, was portrayed by all of the teachers as an integral part of reading practice in V.C.E. English. Reading for meaning, also referred to as “active” and “critical” reading, was generally valued as resisting “static” and “fixed” ideas about texts, validating the multiple ways of knowing and understanding authors and readers create. Common themes in teachers’ views of what constitutes critical reading include some
focus on: the contexts informing the literature; consideration of authorial decisions; developing an independent viewpoint, and analysis of selected scenes. Critical analysis of canonical literature also includes another aspect; considering how contemporary readers might understand or view the text differently to their predecessors. Whilst all of these approaches represent an ideological view of texts, for some teachers this was unacknowledged, whilst others saw it as a “moral imperative”, “social responsibility” and “duty as English teachers” to critically examine how meaning is made.

8.2.1 Resistance to literary theory

Teachers’ responses highlight significant tension around literary theories. Part of the tension around literary debates derives from a wariness that readers might find meaning that is “little more than a shady reflection”, or “a passing fancy” as theories rise to popularity and fade. Some teachers, including Grace, Kerrin and Joy, view literary theories as merely a re-envisioning of the past, arguing there is a circularity in English teaching that sees a constant revival of the humanists and a return to differing critical theorists, “back again and again… with some never really going out of vogue”. For some teachers, like Kerrin, there is a general ambivalence toward “the way we keep doing doughnuts”; although there is also the acknowledgement “every now and then that doughnut… shifts a little bit sideways, and that can be good.” Strictly adhering to these theories, without reflecting on the context in which they arise, and the ideas they encompass, is depicted as “dangerous” and “counterproductive” to the skills of reading and inquiry they are intended to support. Some teachers suggest reading through theoretical lenses can potentially jeopardise meaningful teaching, a viewpoint that was most strongly depicted by Grace:

I hate buzz words and I hate formalised theories but on the flip side I do a fair amount of professional reading, but I tend to take what I’ve learnt and say ‘well that would work to me and yes I understand that, but I would never do that in a pink fit’, and then I just forget about the theories and they become me if you know what I mean, rather than being the academic… I’ve been in a lot of places where reliance on the theories... supplants thoughtful teaching and I’ve also been around long enough to know that theories go round and round in little circles, being relabelled but they mean the same things.

Grace’s declaration “I hate buzz words” signifies her derisive attitude toward the ideological language of bureaucracy surrounding English education. Similar to other experienced English teachers who expressed dislike of theoretical “eduspeak” and “jargon”, Grace outwardly rejects meaningless re-labelling of theories that “go round and round in little circles”. Despite her reservations that academic theories potentially supplant “thoughtful teaching”, Grace shares
some of her colleagues’ openness to understanding what these theories are about and how they might be incorporated into practice. Regardless of how theories are labelled they are generally portrayed as “part of a teaching toolkit” and “what every good teacher does”. Explicitly labelling theories, such as feminism and Marxism, is seen as potentially intimidating and subjugating students, “forcing their ideas into submission”. Furthermore, using the literary language associated with these has the potential to “derail”, “confuse” and “confound” young readers. Exploring ideas without the “literary jargon” and dispensing with labels is viewed as enabling teachers to work with theories in their own ways. Adapting approaches to theories, and borrowing from different lenses is especially depicted as a more authentic approach to informed reading.

Literary theories are seen by some teachers as too academic, and estranged from their practical understandings of what students need to develop as readers. A sense of unease pervades teachers’ accounts reflected in statements that “I hate theories”, “they give me the heebie jeebies”, “scare me silly” and “make me feel stupid”. Whilst Eaglestone and English (2013) suggest literary theory is important to fostering reader independence, empowerment and intellectual curiosity, there is ambivalence toward theory in these teachers’ responses. Fear of the rhetoric and content associated with theoretical knowledge is apparent in these teachers’ reactions, with Ella, Norah and Mark arguing that academic theory should not be imposed on teaching practice. Formalised theories, encompassing literary and educational theory, represent ideological forms of academic knowledge, which need to be adapted and personalised in relevant ways to pedagogical practices. Grace’s statement “they [literary theories] become me if you like” echoes other teachers’ sentiments that they “put [their] own spin on them” and “re-jig them to fit my style”. Numerous teachers spoke encouragingly of how professional reading contributes to their pedagogy, however, this was more valued when gleaned from other colleagues, or produced by their teaching association. Literary theories were depicted as belonging to academia: “for people with robes”, “the academy”, and “the pseudo-intellectuals”, whereas adaptations of these were “more grounded” and “made workable” and “on the most part more meaningful”. Theoretical approaches, when personally adapted, were also deemed as possibly supporting the continual renewal and creativity teachers’ value, in their approach to text and response. Each of the teachers seemed to be a reflective practitioner, valuing having an informed understanding of literary practices that engage readers. Often perspectives drawn from other literature, art, music and photography influenced their interpretations of texts. Encouraging students to explore interpretations of other artistic works was valued as an approach to reading that enables students to theoretically reflect on aspects of composition and representation. This process develops students’ “intuitive senses” and observation skills, subconsciously scaffolding their knowledge of theory and how creative works are open to alternative readings.
Some teachers argued against literary theories for other reasons, seeing these as limiting the creativity of the classroom focus, and subverting the pleasure students experience in finding personal meaning in texts. Partially informed by a reader-response theory, these teachers unknowingly valorised reading practices that encourage students to look at the themes, characters, narration and language of texts in order to develop a plausible interpretation of the text. Teachers use exploratory metaphors to describe students as “digging for meaning”, “chipping away at the text” and “searching for meaning that’s personally real to them”. Whilst understanding something about the authorial intentions and context informing the work is important, and reinforced by the Study Design, there is another purpose influencing teachers’ views. There is a recurring motif in teachers’ depiction of reading as a relational practice in which the students’ interpretation of the text and how this empowers them to see the world is more important than what the author intended or critics suggest. A resistance to “intelligent regurgitation” and “ape-like performativity” arises in some teachers’ justification of a less theoretical approach to text analysis. Developing a reasoned response to the text that draws on an understanding of its core themes and ideas is depicted as liberating students, whereas formal theory is described as “tying their hands” and “narrowing their ideas” to what “others with more authority have said”.

Understanding what Marxism, Feminism, Deconstructionism and other theories are is also seen by some as irrelevant to a community of readers who need to think deeply, but in general are without long-term literary aspirations. Being cognisant of other ideas is more important than knowing the academic disciplines informing their perspectives. If there is a place for theory in mainstream English, Joy, Ella, and Kerrin assert it remains in teaching students how to read for symbolic interpretation; however, this is seen as challenging to implement. Stereotypes of students’ lower socioeconomic, rural and educational backgrounds possibly limit some teachers’ willingness to explicitly explore literary lenses, and the metalanguage associated with these. This is evident for example in Norah’s perception of her students as disenfranchised from academic culture; “for most of them they are the first person in their family going back generations to finish school… the priorities are certainly elsewhere and not in education”. Norah’s perspective differs from others, however, by subverting the importance of theory. Pragmatic approaches to close reading are emphasised; learning quotes, completing character maps and theme charts. This general resistance to literary theory and focus on pragmatic skills is alluded to in Norah’s reflection:

_I am like someone who is a uni’s worst nightmare because I don't really ascribed to any particular literary theories.... I guess when you talk about what inspired me to become a good teacher was having good teachers... the love of reading, and the love of communication. So they're the things that influence me, that and to instil_
kids to love books, to love films to love texts and to think on a deeper level ... so I feel a bit dumbed down because I don't really subscribe to any one theory.... When I’m working with a team none of us though are theory based, we talk more about doing the practical skills, about up-skilling kids in that practical way and not making it too theoretical. We could be. We probably should do a bit more ourselves, but then we can't transfer that into the classroom because we'd scare a cohort of kids off, they'd run screaming if we were too technical.

Theoretical approaches to reading, where considered, are described as being “diluted” and “watered down” by teachers’ who give precedence to pragmatic skills. In Norah’s view teaching texts has “got to be about the practical stuff... it can’t be about the theory” : a theme that arose in several teachers’ emphasis that V.C.E. English must ultimately cater to a general audience. Norah’s reticence toward literary theory is not an outright rejection of its merit. Her statement “we should probably do a bit more ourselves” implies she feels a professional responsibility to develop her own theoretical knowledge. Whilst literary theories are valorised as significant ways of knowing within academic discourse, Norah portrays herself as an outsider to academia, a “uni’s worst nightmare”. Furthermore, Norah suggests her stance is one shared by her peers, “when I’m working with a team, none of us are theory based”. Teachers’ conflicting thoughts around theory are often depicted as based on good intentions. Norah’s wish to inspire, a “cohort of kids” who would otherwise “run screaming if we were too technical”, reflects several teachers’ desires to create a safe, exploratory space in class discussions. Theoretical approaches are potentially alienating, evident in the binaries teachers construct. Non-theoretical approaches are described as “open”, “inviting”, “having that sense of fun” whilst theoretical approaches are portrayed as “too technical”, “overly academic”, and “much too highbrow”. Encouraging students to read deeply is reliant on students’ curiosity and interest being “aroused”, “inflamed” and “ignited” through guided activities and discussion. Theory is depicted as sometimes counterproductive to the aims espoused in Norah’s thoughts, to “instil kids to love books, to love films, to love texts”.

A unique viewpoint that stood out from other teachers’ reflections was Mark’s rejection of postmodernist theory as a contradiction of the Christian values that personally and professionally inform his identity.Whilst literary theories might encourage critical inquiry, “opening” the text to scrutiny and reflection, Mark’s reflection implies that individuals reject some theories in favour of others, especially when one of these might be considered more objective or truthful. This is particularly evident in Mark’s rejection of Postmodernism and adherence to a Christian perspective. Mark’s “hobby horse” in each interview was an apparent contestation of Postmodernism and its perceived empowerment of the reader over the author’s
intention. This image of a god-like reader conflicts with Mark’s view of the writer’s authority and the presence of an absolute truth – the existence of one true God as Creator.

Postmodernist theory talks about no absolute and therefore every interpretation is a valid interpretation…. What I tend to say is that while we can look at … the context in which a novel is created in, the context created within the novel and the context the reader reads a novel within … there can be no denying that when the author wrote the text they had a series of viewpoints which they wished to get across and those viewpoints are still valid even if the context we read it in today is vastly different…. You just can’t say because we have moved this far and we believe ‘this and this now’ what they wrote is not valid any more. What we say is you need to find out how and why the author wrote it, the events that occurred to them and the influences it had on them when they wrote it.

Mark’s concern with Postmodernism sharply contrasts to some of the teachers who saw Postmodernism as an important signifier of contemporary reading practice. Ella, for example, argued that Postmodernism represents an integral shift away from a 20th century treatment of the text as “stand-alone and isolated with an absolute meaning” to a more considered focus on how meaning is created, adapted and changed over time. However, for Mark, who considers himself a “traditionalist”, postmodernism conflicts with his own conservative religious ideologies. For Mark, all interpretations of text are “coloured” by the readers’ worldview, regardless of “whether they acknowledge it or not”. Mark conceptualises all worldviews as faith systems: “from strict fundamentalist Christian ones right through to atheist… to a humanistic one… a Communist one, or whatever it is”. In order to meaningfully engage with the text, Mark infers that the reader needs to be cognisant of how their world view shapes their interpretation of the moral and philosophical implications of its message; not “every interpretation is a valid interpretation”. Postmodernism is perceived as a particularly radical ideological agenda in which the reader imposes their belief system on the interior world of the text. Mark portrays this imposition as “dangerous” because it diminishes the validity of the author’s viewpoint and decontextualizes literature. Mark is adamant the original viewpoints of the text must retain their validity “even if the context we read it in today is vastly different”. He does not stand in opposition to critical interpretations overall, valorising an approach to literary inquiry that considers “how and why the author wrote [the text], the events that occurred to [the author] and the influences it had on them when they wrote it”. Mark’s view privileges the authority of the author as creator of the text, and emphasises the reader’s limitations as creators of meaning.

Postmodernist interpretations of literary texts are particularly problematic for Mark because they significantly conflict with a Christian worldview, in which there is an absolute truth, that Truth being God. There is a particular way of knowing that is overtly valorised; “how we live,
what we read... and what we accept is covered by our faith”. This is sharply juxtaposed to Postmodernism, which Mark argues “has no absolute so therefore, how I live is only my concern, nobody else because what I feel is okay”. Mark perceives the god-like authority of the reader as ideological and problematic, in a way that a Christian perspective is not because it is based on an undeniable moral truth. Mark’s discussion of George Orwell’s ‘1984’ exemplifies his viewpoint. The bleakness of the text’s ending renders the novel “a very black book”, which does not epitomise the triumph of Christian truth over the oppression of a totalitarian Communist regime. However, rather than searching to “find Christian elements in the novel”, which would impose a view upon the text as a postmodernist might do, Mark argues “we can acknowledge it is in conflict with a Christian perspective, we say that is a viewpoint that exists, but it is a viewpoint we cannot accept”. For Mark, a Christian reading of the text in literature teaching “takes over from any other literary one”, and ultimately any reading of text is examined in light of an inherent understanding of “our relationship to God, our relationship to ourselves, to others, and to the environment, all tied together in an absolute Truth.” The students are encouraged to have “that extra dimension to their writing, which doesn’t mean they have to write everything in a Christian format, but their ideas must always be formed from the perspective that they’re holding”. The implication that the reader’s view of the text is limited by strict adherence to Christian perspective is overridden by Mark’s ultimate conviction of an authority that is greater than the text and the reader.

Despite the general trepidation over how literary theories might be made relevant and accessible to V.C.E. English students, some argued in favour of taking a greater theoretical approach in teaching text and response. Explicitly modelling and performing readings of texts, utilising literary perspectives, emerged as a significant theme in three of the teacher’s accounts of practice. Performing “readings” of the text, as opposed to accepting a fixed or static view of its meaning, was emphasised as enriching students’ encounters with themes, values and ideas. Utilising theoretical principles to examine literature was described in visionary terms as “seeing the world of the text anew”, “standing in someone else’s shoes”, and “looking without those rose coloured glasses”. Explicitly working with theory and developing students’ metalanguage was also depicted as strengthening students’ conceptual skills and their ability to articulate the sophisticated ideas they would otherwise be “deprived”, “starved” and “robbed” from knowing. Deepening students’ critical and aesthetic appreciation of literary forms is also seen as contributing to the formation of their humane identities; transforming “their hearts and minds”, “speaking to their inner core” and “waking them up to the world and how others experience it”. A particular emphasis on how views and values are ideologically embodied through language and form is part of a process that helps students realise the “wealth of meanings” available to them as readers, and also as text response writers. This is partially evident in Mary’s reflection:
We worked on different aspects of the stories... I worked on with the kids with different interpretations... and I went through and did... a search of different literary criticisms of these stories and said 'okay these are where I got these from and these are the different interpretations of that text... What I tried to say is that these are people who read the story, they may have their own philosophical bent towards it like feminist theory or Marxist theory or something, but basically all these people have read the same story and these are some of their interpretations of what they think that story is about... and yes they [the students] did create their own interpretation! .... The language is kind of complex and stuff so we just really wanted them to understand what they would be reading, but by doing this beforehand... they were actively looking for it rather than reading it and saying only what you think it is about.

In all of her interviews Mary emphasised the connection between her “passion” for literature and language, and her identity as the daughter of hard-working immigrants who encouraged their children to “speak, read and write English... and to instil in us a love of those things also”. Her critical appreciation of literature as a higher aesthetic defined by linguistic eloquence, is also perceived as deriving from her own sense of pleasure and intellectual fulfilment as an interpreter of literature and other aesthetic mediums. Reading as an act of symbolic interpretation of literature, film, painting and sculpture, “of trying to work out their meaning”, combined with her own strong sense of cultural heritage, informs Mary’s view of critical reading. This is evident in the recurring motifs of Mary’s reflections, implying critical approaches to inquiry foster a recognition of cultural diversity; the interconnectedness of human stories and ability to decipher meaning when the “language is kind of complex”.

Informed theoretical approaches to reading, in which students are “actively looking” for meaning, are juxtaposed by Mary to the implied passive, and less substantial act of “saying only what you think it [the text] is about”. Some teachers, similar to Mary, depict their professional identities as the “old guards”, “the last gatekeeper” and the “true believer” who value the role of literary theory in exposing the social and political conditions of the novel. This is evident in Mary’s depiction of teaching Poe’s short stories. Mary explains the practices, which scaffold her students’ reading. Exploring Gothic art, and examining ideas associated with dark romanticism in literature and surreal film, provides a historical, literary and aesthetic foundation for her students’ knowledge. Mary extends her students’ contextual appreciation of literature by also explicitly teaching with literary theories, using these as lenses for exploring the subjectivity of interpretations. This is evident in her depiction of advice she gives her students about “people who read the same story... may have their own philosophical bent towards it... like feminist theory or Marxist theory”. Her students’ ability to question the narrator’s objectivity –
whether the figure of the black cat is a literal or metaphorical device— is considered proof of independent and critical thinking; evident in her exclamation “they [the students] did create their own interpretation!” Mary’s view represents a dominant theme in this small group of teachers who see it as their duty to liberate their students from “the teacher’s authority”, “the pages of the text” and “their own youth” by giving them the “tools of the trade” to inquire and respond to texts in meaningful ways. There are ways of knowing valued by these teachers that are ultimately founded on an informed understanding of how texts work in symbolic ways and convey a history of ideas, injustices and silences they can intellectualise and respond to. Reading through literary perspectives ultimately creates opportunities to gain insight into the text and “to keep making those connections” as readers.

8.3 WRITING IN RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

Responding to literary texts is depicted as important in teachers’ views of senior English, and encompasses a range of traditions from formulaic approaches to text response, through to developing students’ capacities as authors of creative, persuasive and expository texts. The subjective experience of pleasure derived from a personal encounter with the text whilst valued, is often portrayed as conflicting with the need for more ‘objective’ measures of assessment that impose constraints on modes of response. The discussion of writing begins with an examination of some of the key themes and issues that arose in teachers’ stories around Reading and Responding; an Area of Study focused on critical reading and response. Text response is a literary practice most perceived as a valued ‘traditional’ form of writing in V.C.E. English. While an examination of the interior world of the text is valued in teachers’ accounts, tensions emerge around how students’ understanding of narratives are best represented and assessed.

For all of the teachers the text response essay is considered an important feature of English as an academic discipline, eliciting students’ grasp of dominant ideas, language and expression. However, the changing nature of text response questions toward more analytical frames is viewed as placing new demands on students as literary meaning-makers and writers. Students are viewed as needing to be “creative and active agents” in reading and responding to texts, which is potentially challenging in an educational climate dominated by neo-liberalist discourses of student productivity. Imagery of students “regurgitating”, “reproducing” and “memorising” key knowledge, using “formulaic” modes of response, emphasises teachers’ preoccupation with standards and assessment. Developing reading and writing practices that empower students to discern meaningful connections is viewed as “the ideal”, and “part of the holy grail of English”. However, this ideal is portrayed as potentially undermined by the looming pressure of a written examination at the end of V.C.E. Despite the pressures of the external assessment regime, teachers’ responses generally convey a respect for text response as a rich tradition from which English has “grown”, “been borne” and “come of age”.
Responding to the interior world of the text is discursively constructed as an academic enterprise that equips students with the history of ideas and language needed to participate effectively in society. A close focus on language and ideas is a textual practice some referred to as explicitly stated in the Study Design through references to metalanguage and understanding cultural and social values.

The themes and tensions around text response writing are contrasted to the teachers’ attitudes toward creative writing embodied in the Creating and Presenting study. The emphasis on students actively using texts as critical filters to explore universal contexts is portrayed as a more authentic experience of textual response. Whilst text response is seen as belonging to academic writing, Context responses are valued as “real world”. Teachers’ valuing of more creative approaches is evident in the metaphors of liberation they use: students are “unleashed”, “unbound” and “free” to explore ideas. The range of Contexts explored: ‘Identity and Belonging’; ‘Whose Reality’, ‘Encountering Conflict’ and ‘The Imaginative Landscape’ are positively seen as helping students see the exterior world of ideas authors respond to. This conceptual approach to writing is also valorised as scaffolding students’ transformation from youth to young adulthood, particularly their ability to express social and cultural understandings in complex forms. Although both text and context responses are fraught with challenges, together they are viewed as assisting students to transition from being interpreters of texts to creators of meaning.

8.3.1 Text and Response

The interdependent relationship between reading and writing is a common theme in teachers’ accounts of textual practice. Encouraging students to thoughtfully engage with texts through activities such as literary mapping, small group discussion and creating visual timelines is seen as integral to literary inquiry. These kinds of activities are particularly valued for developing students’ capacity to identify and discuss textual ideas, through sustained written compositions. Furthermore, they represent the possibility, amidst the analytical demands of senior English, to creatively inhabit the imaginative landscape of the author. However, the imposition of assessment, particularly the examination worth 50% of the students’ total study score significantly shapes the teachers’, and their students’, perception of what counts as valued literary practices. Discourses of pleasure associated with creative imagining, inevitably conflict with discourses around performativity and productivity associated with assessment. This relationship is particularly pertinent although not unique, to Ella’s reflection on the demands of reading and response.

At the moment we rate writing more than reading, even though I noticed that they [the students] do that as well... Perhaps the kids might be doing that because
that’s what they see is considered most important in their teacher’s eyes... the end product... The essay... and to them that is something that they can see they have written... I feel because so much weight is put on the end product... we find ourselves doing a lot of ‘here comes the aeroplane kind of stuff’ to get them to that point where maybe... you can hand in something to be authenticated... the reading for its own sake could be more important than what they are doing but I don't think they see it as that. They only read the bits that help them to produce the product.

Ella’s declaration, “they only read the bits that help them to produce a product” alludes to the challenging relationship between reading and writing in V.C.E. English. Teachers’ perceptions of what they want their students to value are starkly contrasted to the realities of assessment. Some teachers value the expository text response essay as the visible assessment of the deeper understandings students have internalised from their reading. However, others see it more simply as an intelligent act of reproduction that rewards dominant readings and subverts students’ genuine viewpoints. Norah and Kerrin share, to an extent, Ella’s view that her students are not cognisant of the "connection between all the reading that they have done" and the sophisticated practices that enable them to produce a written response. Writing is depicted as a product, "something they have written", disconnected from the act of reading for deeper meaning. Ella’s description of "doing a whole lot of here comes the aeroplane kind of stuff" metaphorically reinforces the view of her students as passive readers and the teacher as complicit in sustaining this culture. Similar metaphors arise in teachers’ reflections of text response as “ticking off a shopping list” and “spoon-feeding with a spoonful of sugar” in the hope students will “soak it up like sponges”. This passive culture is shown, in part, to be an ideological product of the demand to get students to a critical point where they can produce an "authenticated" piece of writing.

Embedded in a broader discourse about student performance and success, teachers’ reflections on text response are often shaped by their school’s need to satisfy performance standards. As the leader of the English domain, Ella feels accountable for raising the academic profile of the students, admitting to pressure from the administration: “it was quite clearly addressed that our English scores are disappointing”. The urgent need to address students’ essay based performance contrasts with the passionate discourses evident when teachers describe working with texts, particularly film. Helping students to grasp the rich symbolism in the text and to discover personal fulfilment as meaning-makers is valued. Teachers construct ideal versions of English that allow “seeds of thought to grow”, and where students “reap the harvest” of their reading. These teachers are conscious of the "weight... on the end product", and the consequences this has on their students’ devaluing of literary practices. Ella’s perspective that
writing the essay takes precedence over meaningful reading and interpretation is a common theme in teachers’ narratives. Kerrin, Joy and Norah also suggest that their students’ attitudes are subconsciously aligned with what they falsely see their teachers as valuing, the end written product is “most important in their teachers’ eyes”. Ella’s view that text response should instead encourage "reading for its own sake" emphasises the idea that focussing too much on critical writing is at the expense of reader engagement. Students in this context are limited by their view of reading as solely for the purpose of routine assessment. The culminating written response should ideally, in most teachers’ view, become part of interconnected literary practices that help students recognise how “meaning connects with them personally in a whole range of texts all over the world”.

Both the graduate and experienced teachers of V.C.E. English shared a view of text response as a traditional form of reading and responding, primarily concerned with an in-depth examination of the interior world of the text. For the experienced teachers, however, who had taught previous Study Designs, the concepts and approaches to text response writing were seen as evolving and shifting across time. Pertinent to many responses was the idea of text response writing as a reflexive social practice, informed by the past and conversely evolving to encompass new understandings of critical theory. Many saw 21st century constructions of English as critically moving away from a Leavisite view of the text steeped in cultural appreciation and the pursuit of noble universal themes. This is evident in claims “it’s all theory now – where’s the beauty gone?” and “we’ve gone from high class to high criticism”. Feminism, Deconstruction and Postmodernism are seen as part of a critical turn that has gradually changed the focus of English in Victoria, particularly in the last 25 years. A traditional focus on theme and character has ideologically shifted to encompass a critical focus on language and textual elements. This ideological shift, Ewan argues, is reflected in the range of text response questions students are exposed to:

The Study Design started to shift and there was more of a focus on elements and secondly when we bought in part one and part two [questions] in a previous study... that suddenly opened up a new set of possibilities... Concepts and ideas are not necessarily themes. Themes... mislead a lot of kids... it’s like slinging a bit of putty at the wall and hoping it will stick... whereas if you state this as the notion... ‘coming to terms with difficult experiences in your life and what we learn through them’ is an example of ‘Maestro’, that has a lot more meaning to me than saying this is all about adolescence... So my view would be that is what is increasingly happening... the panel has worked really hard to be scrupulous and to look at what was inside the Study Design so there have been elements on narrative and focusing on different elements and on language and images and so
on... it's been quite interesting that they’re things that even a decade ago or 20 years ago wouldn't have appeared... So I think I would... take to task those who argue that text response questions per se inevitably limit or if you like are dishonest or disingenuous in terms of how they understand text or the teaching of text... I don't think the evidence supports that in... the broadening of the styles the questions are being asked.

Whilst many of the teachers in the study, particularly Mark and Joy, shared Ewan’s view of text response questions as having evolved in their focus across time, Ewan saw this change as significantly making new demands on students as writers. Ewan’s viewpoint significantly contrasts with some of the other teachers interviewed, including Ella and Norah, who argued that text response questions are often predictable resulting in formulaic responses, which inevitably reflect dominant readings of themes, characters, or structural narrative elements. His position is ideologically informed by a critical view of the Study Design as responsive to trends, “from the days when we did clear thinking... through to where kids are now”. These trends reflect a deeper critical turn away from themes, which he depicts as shallow, “like slinging putty at the wall and hoping it will stick”, toward more complex concepts and notions. The example from Maestro, “coming to terms with difficult experiences... and what we learn through them” significantly contrasts to the simplicity of topical themes such as war and family, explored in past H.S.C. Englishes. His viewpoint embodies an outright rejection of simplistic literary constructions, reinforced in his emphatic declaration, “I would take to task those who argue that text response questions... inevitably limit... how they understand text or the teaching of text”.

There is an implied debate that some teachers in the English profession perceive the study of text response as academically narrow in its focus, evident in Ewan’s reference to their claims that text questions are “dishonest or disingenuous”. Many teachers in the study, excluding Ewan, described text response writing as a “recipe” implying the questions are narrow and predictable, directing students toward written responses that genuinely limit their ability to deviate from the dominant ideas imposed by the question. This formulaic view of text response rendered teachers’ perceptions of writing as “dry” and less connected to the “real world” of readers’ lives. Ewan's view of text response, however, is a more positive one, requiring teachers to focus on textual elements and the production of quality writing.

Ewan argues that his view of text response subtly differs from some in the profession, by claiming that the debate around creating and presenting detracted from teachers’ ability to focus on less obvious course changes. As a member of V.C.E. advisory panels, Ewan supports the “scrupulous” actions of the governing body, and he is critical of teacher professionalism whereby the “subtle” changes in the area of text response have gone unnoticed. These nuanced changes are depicted as critically significant, representing shifting dynamics in how teachers
work with texts and the quality of responses students produce. Informed by his extensive experience as an Assessor, Ewan is convinced of a long-term trend where “students write physically more, with more detail [and] more insight”. These detailed text responses are seen as representing a more sophisticated understanding of textual ideas, structures and imagery. Similar to the other teachers interviewed, Ewan valorises close reading of selected passages to support students’ written discussion of themes and characters. However, he more forcefully distinguishes past H.S.C. and V.C.E. English courses from the current one, emphasising the focus on “structure, voice, organisation, and tone”. Ewan’s metaphor of the text as a “sandwich” conveys his approach to text response in similar ways to the other teachers’ depictions of it as a “Victorian sponge”, “hamburger” and “sponge cake”. In order for students to think about a question and to argue a viewpoint they need to be able to look structurally at the narrative, or what Ewan terms the sandwich of the text, knowing “how the beginning and end come together”. The middle layers of the metaphorical sandwich or sponge represent the complications and possibilities of meaning inherent in the text. Understanding why the text was written, how elements of the text connect and the choices the author made are key areas of knowledge, which represent “a big pedagogical shift” and “a stepping stone” underpinning the traditional “nuts and bolts” of text response. Teachers describe this critical turn as essentially about understanding the relationship between language, form and meaning.

While Ewan's view echoes a dominant theme in the teachers’ responses, that students must be skilled to grapple with the “nitty-gritty” of the question, he is hesitant to endorse the formulaic structures of writing such as T(opic sentence), E (explanation) E (Example) L (Link) many of the teachers portrayed as the “recipe” or “basic toolkit” of text response. The greater analytical focus of text response questions, he argues, demands the ability to not simply discuss the topic but more importantly “argue a case and to resolve the topic”. Whilst coherence is critical in developing argument, Ewan argues that approaches such as T.E.E.L. come at expense of good quality writing if slavishly followed by the writer. This is a viewpoint also clearly evident in Kerrin and Joy's reflections. An important aspect of literary practice is developing students’ ability to conceptually argue a viewpoint with clarity and conviction, without trying to reproduce a pre-planned response or “second guess what the examiner is wanting”. Informed by democratic and romantic discourses writing is envisioned by some as a mode of self-expression that begins with the text yet ultimately leads to “paths” and “roads” of intellectual and spiritual fulfilment. The imposition of dominant readings reproduced through predictable questions is portrayed in ominous terms as “dangerous”, “terribly Orwellian” and counter to the literary and cultural aims of the subject. Their perceptions that formulaic structures are rewarded, despite limiting students’ autonomy, further detract from these aims.
Teachers perceive the production of text response essays as a traditional, rigorous and integral part of the academic discipline of V.C.E. English. The recurring emphasis on rigour in teachers’ reflections is embodied in an ideological view of what critical writing achieves. Perceived real life skills: knowing how to represent oneself, to persuade others, and to connect with audiences are described as a “natural embodiment”, “product of growth” and “realistic outcome” text based writing achieves. Some argue that there is further potential to develop students’ real life skills, encouraging them to move from interpretation to evaluation. In a global, media saturated environment, evaluating texts is viewed as significant, empowering students to make meaningful connections between what they read and how they choose to respond. Whilst some teachers favoured this approach endorsing it as “a sign of the times” and “the next direction” Ewan was adamantly against it. Underpinning Ewan’s stance is an awareness of debates about the Australian Curriculum and how V.C.E. English might be remodelled in accordance with it. Ewan is adamant that the assessment of students’ expository writing should focus on “how well they pull the text apart, understand it, [and] show understanding of the structure as befits the question”. Developing a reasoned, articulate point of view is perceived as a very different skill to evaluation, which requires students to compare the text to a breadth of other literature. Ewan is particularly concerned about the language of evaluation being associated with literature in the proposed Australian English Curriculum. Ewan bluntly rejects ‘evaluative responses’ such as those entailed in approaches to literary ‘appreciation’ in the Australian curriculum as an “absurd” and a “dangerous” representation of ideological “absolutism”. Whilst many of the teachers interviewed were unfamiliar with the details of the proposed draft of the Australian Curriculum, Ewan was actively involved in briefings, and cognizant of how this might impact on V.C.E. English. This is particularly pertinent in his incredulity that a move away from reading and responding toward literary ‘evaluation’ might position the student as a “world expert” when realistically “how can a 17-year-old make a judgement about how wonderful the text is, when have they read? What have they experienced?” Ewan reinforces his viewpoint by suggesting that these ideological shifts in curriculum design will have potentially disastrous consequences on the quality of student responses. He dramatically predicts that students will write ridiculous contrived comments like “Goldsworthy is done a really good job here”, as opposed to articulating a considered response. Like others in the study, Ewan valorises approaches to texts that empower students to think about texts and come to some kind of realisation or epiphany about its meaning. However, producing a qualified response to the question, with a reasoned interpretation, is framed as a more meaningful task as opposed to evaluations that require knowledge beyond the scope of their literary and adolescent experiences.

While text response essays assist students to conceptualise ideas and artfully use metalanguage, the complexity of these genres is portrayed as potentially disenfranchising some students in
assessment. Mary, Kerrin and Norah expressed concern that there is a disparity between the deeper forms of meaning readers might identify with, and the limitation of an assessment model more focused on essay composition. This juxtaposition between the types of writing assessed and the possibility of responding in more reflective modes is a challenge some argue that 21st century English subjects must acknowledge and resolve. Some of these challenges are articulated in Mark’s reflection:

I used to begin my year 11 class saying ‘I have got to teach you how to write three essays for an unknown assessor in two years time’, and that is essentially what the assessment of English is. And even with the SACs through the year 12 course, they are all essay type responses and I’m not sure all of our kids are equipped in order to actually write that kind of response. So whether there is some other way of we can do that with shorter essays... shorter type responses, paragraph responses... or something like that... But I think the structure of the essay is what defeats the kids quite often, where they have to sit down and structure something, which logically leads the reader to a conclusion... I don’t want to see it dumbed down in a way but I’m not sure that essays are the only ways in which you can assess somebody’s understanding of the text... I mean it is very good but... I know within my English course I use concept maps and character charts and things like that to help them get the knowledge to be able to write the essay, and I wonder if that final step is always necessary or if there isn’t some way we can change the SACs perhaps. But then, the SACs are a training ground for the exam final assessment, so as long as the final assessment is all essays then we are going to have to train them to write essays.

Framing Mark’s account is a perception of expository essay writing as a valuable, yet problematic mode of response in V.C.E. English. Many of the teachers interviewed argued, in ways similar to Mark, that text response essays are an “artificial” form of written response, relying on a student’s ability to discern and perform a dominant reading of texts, which is only differentiated by students’ capacity to clearly articulate their ideas. However, despite concerns with authenticity and relevance beyond academia, the rhetoric of self-expression and persuasion that students “must master” as part of literary study is valued. The exclusion of sustained compositions from a V.C.E. English course would, in some teacher’s view represent a “dumbing down” of its academic discipline. Mastering text analysis and response is portrayed as a rite of passage, representing students’ maturation as readers and critical writers. It is also the culminating skill assessed in their matriculation from secondary school. This significantly influences teachers’ text response practice, evident in the rites of passage speech Mark delivers to his Year 11 class, “I have to teach you how to write for an unknown assessor in two years...
The text response essay in Mark’s depiction represents a particular analytical mode of writing based on complex questions and composed in a stylised form, which “logically leads the reader to a conclusion”. The importance of developing logic and argument is a recurring motif in Mark’s reflection, reiterated in his later declaration “I try to instil in the kids some form of logic and planning in their approach to text”. The study of logic is represented as counteracting the potential cultural impoverishment of a study that would otherwise be subjectively relegated to less rigour, “[studying] a bit here and a bit there”. However, while Mark values rigour he also raises a theme prominent in teachers’ responses, arguing for greater creativity and flexibility in text based assessment.

The problematic relationship between reading and writing practices is apparent in Mark’s declaration, “I’m not sure that essays are the only ways... you can assess somebody's understanding of the text”. Although Mark self-identifies as a traditionalist, his view of assessment is influenced by developments in multi-modality and contemporary debates about students as meaning-makers and designers of multimodal text. Similar to others he describes using concept maps and character charts to develop students’ writing yet he argues these might also become viable alternatives to the traditional “final step” of essay-based responses. The authenticity of incorporating a range of shorter, reflective written responses, however, is at odds with the overwhelming demands of the examination. Essay writing is portrayed as a difficult skill to master, one that is teacher-directed and requires significant training. The continual “production” and “churning out” of essay-based responses within coursework is part of the necessary “training regime” and “boot camp” teachers perceive as integral for student performance. However, Mark argues there is an inequality in students’ ability to master these skills, evident in his assertion that “the essay is what defeats the kids quite often”. The validity of assessing students through shorter oral, written and multimodal forms is proposed by some as more equitably and meaningfully connected to the reading practices enacted in the classroom. However, maintaining the status quo is a recurring theme in teachers’ narratives, suggesting alternative approaches are unlikely to emerge “as long as the final assessment is all essays.”

8.3.2 Text, contexts and response

The introduction of the Creating and Presenting context signified an important development in V.C.E English. Responding to complex concepts associated with conflict, identity, imaginative landscapes and explorations of reality, is portrayed in teachers’ reflections as a dynamic and innovative approach to literary response, equipping students to reflect on global environments. Developing students’ sense of authorship within these contexts, however, is also shown to be a conceptual ideal that sometimes conflicts with students’ differing capacities to use the text as a filter for ideas. Teachers’ views of Creating and Presenting predominantly affirm the value of writing in response to contexts as an authentic, fluid and expressive approach to reading and
writing, which is more closely connected to real world experience. Steeped in global discourses concerned with democratic citizenship and cultural tolerance, contextual based writing is particularly seen as encouraging students to move beyond interpretation to becoming meaning-makers. The image of students as “authors of meaning”, “masters of rhetoric” and “innovators who can use language” is connected to literary explorations of significant human concepts. Whilst past traditions of English are viewed as text-centric, contextual writing is valorised for the freedom of practice it offers both teachers and students as readers and co-creators of meaning. Conversely, it is this fluidity of meaning and broad parameters of composition that generates teachers’ concerns. Asking students to marry significant concepts to a study of text, and to use these understandings to produce a sophisticated expository, persuasive or creative composition was seen by all teachers as a challenging higher order thinking task, which not all students are equally skilled in creating. Creative writing is a significant area of tension with many teachers suggesting that a culture of imaginative writing has diminished. This perception was viewed as creating new challenges for teachers of V.C.E. English to find innovative ways of readdressing this imbalance.

The teachers’ viewpoints on writing within Context, particularly creative genres, were influenced by the changes they were experiencing. One of the main tensions, which arose in the teachers’ reflections, was a concern about a lack of internal integrity in the Study Design, and a lack of transparency of what the assessment panel intended for the task to ‘look’ like. In the earlier interviews, teachers constructed diverse views of what the Context study expected of student writers, with each vaguely shaped by a sense of the Study Design as they “fumbled around in the dark”, “sailed in murky waters”, “hit the rocks” and were “barely treading water”. In the final interviews a year later, and two years into the course change, these teachers were “getting their heads around it”, “loving it”, “plain sailing”, “almost afloat” and “on the right train”. They had confidently differentiated the Outcome for Creating and Presenting from Reading and Responding, and saw the task as some kind of informed, or inspired approach to writing. What remained a central motif in their responses, with the exception of Ewan, was a sense of discontent around, what Grace describes as “such a higher order thinking process”, and one so “badly defined” that one piece of writing might generate “five different interpretations”. These issues around subjectivity, deriving from their questions of how the prompt, the text and the writing should be fused together and assessed, were influencing their advice to students. For some such as Kerrin and Joy, the Context study seemed to have clear links to the Unit 4 Literature course; it was essentially a literary study. For others such as Mary, it was a re-envisioning of approaches to theme, central to earlier H.S.C. courses. In Mark’s view it was a re-working of the old Writing Folio element, focused on central ideas. For those who were new to the course, such as Ella and Norah, it was foremost about writing and little to do with the text. The problem of writing was further complicated by disparities the teachers saw
between the ideological nature of Contexts, and the types of writing each more comfortably embodied. A study of ‘The Imaginative Landscape’ was viewed as more closely relevant to the production of creative responses, whilst the politics of ‘Encountering Conflict’ were seen as more suited to expository modes. Grace described this conflict as “comparing apples and bananas and grapes and pears” and it is an apt one for encompassing the teachers’ thoughts. Despite these disparities, the teachers’ viewpoints were aligned in valuing the Context as an important cultural shift. The course change was seen as recognition that English should promote a rich culture of writing in the classroom, with many seeing this as a more authentic way to engage with the ideas embedded in literary texts.

Creating a culture of writing is synonymous in teachers’ reflections to creating a “knowledge based society” and “informed world”. Writing is portrayed as a sophisticated communication form, with literary modes depicted as art and non-literary genres as intellectual and “progressive”. A society without writing, based on ethical and cultural awareness is described in dystopian terms as “bleak”, “ignorant and open to shame” and “the cause of things like propaganda and Holocausts… but good writing has an intellect”. However, encouraging students to freely write is depicted as a challenge requiring a revival of passion and pleasure that has been lost to criticism in V.C.E. English. The teachers construct a despairing view of students’ sense of authorship, particularly around their composition of creative texts. Five of the teachers depict creative and imaginative genres as more relevant to literary study in the lower secondary years, where developing personal connections to texts is part a culture of “reading for pleasure”. Imagination and creativity is viewed as a “diminishing territory” as students advance towards the senior years of English, more centred on critical and analytical modes of reading and response. The importance of re-developing a writing culture, which allows students to creatively respond to ideas about the human condition, is an important theme in the teachers’ reflections. The teacher’s enterprise in creating this culture is particularly significant. Teachers depict their roles as the ones who help students “find their muse”, “find their voices” and give them the “courage to think”. Empowering students to become co-authors of meaning, and to write beyond the scope of their individual experience is a process teachers contribute to and often, must inspire. Norah’s account particularly elucidates this role of the teacher in establishing a creative and self-reflexive writing culture:

I think the year 12 the context, you have to be a facilitator, you have to guide them in discussion but not overrun it, you have to provide them with a wealth of information and material that they can take on and write about and discuss, and that challenges their ideas… I set my context work up in groups… I wanted them to talk to other people about ‘Identity and Belonging’ and write about the different subtopics that we did, so I did rotate them through groups and activities.
and they produced a scrapbook, so they’ve got all of those ideas... So lots of discussion. We got them to be quite visual and I got them to create pages in their scrapbook... I was really conscious that I wanted to make it different to text response and that they had to respond to the text in terms of the ideas rather than the content.

Norah frames contextual study as a literary practice that markedly differs from text response study in which the teacher is the gatekeeper of the knowledge her students are expected to master and articulate. She describes the teacher’s role as a “facilitator”, scaffolding learning opportunities through providing “a wealth of information and material that they can take on and write about and discuss”. This emphasis on guiding students toward independent skills of creative thinking and authorship is an important theme in teachers’ reflection on imaginative writing. In Norah’s account, her students have a particularly significant role in interpreting meaning, because they are given the freedom to think and to write about the “real world”. This is juxtaposed in teachers’ responses to the restrictions of writing within the confines imposed by a text centric focus on analysis. Whilst students generate ideas from a close reading of the text, they are not conceptually limited by the text, which empowers them as imaginative thinkers and authors. Influenced by democratic discourses, teachers depict their students as active negotiators and co-authors of meaning, engaged in dialogue with others. This dialogue prepares their students to write in response to critical ideas. This is particularly evident in the metaphor of context study as a “springboard”, referenced several times by Norah and the other teachers interviewed.

Teachers value Context writing as a signifier of 21st century thinking, which values a global outlook and a desire to contribute to society. The philosophical dimensions of the Context study are seen as an expression of the important ideas that shape culture, society and individuals. Core themes are seen as embedded in the Contexts: questions about what it means to be human, how individuals perceive experience, and how literature encapsulates stories from “which we learn” and “continue to feel”. In Norah’s school, students study the context of ‘Identity and Belonging’; a context she suggests is about the “bigger picture of who we are”. Concepts like identity are depicted, in Norah’s reflections, as beginning with a personal sense of self, yet shaped and understood in terms of a greater sociality of meaning, made evident though studies of the humanities, the arts and the media. Teachers are conscious of creating a culture of writing that is informed by these diverse representations of human identity, and alternative viewpoints. This is pertinent in Norah’s description of practice; her students discuss ideas, keep scrapbooks of their responses and experiment with genres. Norah, and others in the study, encourage their students to construct hybrid pieces of the three modes of writing: expository, persuasive and creative, which expand on the critical and imaginative processes involved in
reading and thinking about the Contexts. This emphasis on imaginative and creative authorship is particularly encouraged for more competent writers. Teachers depict dynamic approaches to writing in which students imagining hypothetical scenarios and experiment with voice, perspective and form.

Whilst teachers’ perceive the Context as “exciting” and creatively liberating, some also acknowledge the converse challenges this creates. One of the merits of context study is that it lends itself to the imaginative landscape, encouraging students to see “there is more outside of where I am and my reality”. In this sense, creative writing is valorised as an expressive and inspired approach, which enables students to explore contexts through characters and plots borne of their imagination. Despite some teachers’ openness toward creative writing, most emphasised, however, that students gravitate toward expository and persuasive genres that are more familiar to them. Developing a creative writing culture offers scope for “creative kids to add their twist” and “spice things up” yet for many students the constraints of analytical genres remain a “safe harbour”, although some argue this does not necessarily equate to quality writing.

The binary nature of creative writing as challenging and expository genres as safe is a resonant thread in teachers’ reflections. Increasing students’ familiarity as readers with a range of fiction texts is depicted as a necessary precursor to creative writing. Imagining characters, predicting plots and exploring narrative structures are an important step in developing students’ awareness of what counts as “good” writing. Reflecting on how authors shape ideas, and how that positions the reader to respond is a literary practice some perceive as integral to authorship. However, even confident readers are portrayed as sometimes lacking competence as writers, with many struggling to cross, what Ewan describes as “the great divide” of Context response.

Creative writing is viewed as stifled, in part, by students’ false perceptions that expository essays are more likely to meet the assessor’s approval. Binaries of expository genres as more objective and predictably structured, and creative modes as too subjective frame teachers’ perspectives and possibly inhibit the advice they give to their students. Described as “risky” and “murky waters”, Year 12 is depicted by some teachers as too late for addressing students’ unfamiliarity with literature and inexperience as writers. Whilst they might develop the “basics” of plot, character and theme, incorporating contextual ideas is a sophisticated skill “many find difficult to master”. The sense of futility underlying the teachers’ perceptions of creative response stems from a view of V.C.E. English as being able to refine, but not establish, students’ writing skills. Ewan’s reflections particularly emphasise this concern, and are conveyed in his view of Year 12 as “window dressing”. This dual potential for creative writing to either showcase human ingenuity or lack sophistication and development is evident in Ewan’s reflection:
Too many kids have got it into their head, and teachers have too, that the easy way around this is to just to do some story and write something that has some vague flick at something to do with Context and that will do... and it is like year eight or year nine – the worst kind of narrative writing which is purposeless... it shows no complexity in thinking and I think we’ve taken the view now that there’s got to be more... a clearer sense [that] the text is being used in an intelligent way to produce ideas and to produce writing. I think that is something that we are going to have to push a lot harder. I think there is a realisation that as an Area of Study there’s been too much focus for some kids on just getting a basic idea about contexts like ‘Identity and Belonging’, ‘Whose Reality’ and ‘Imaginative landscape’... and writing some piece of garbage thinking that will do.

Ewan implies that good quality creative writing should be encouraged, although he constructs a view of this as endangered by teachers who are complicit in letting students produce a “vague flick at something to do with Context”. His view echoes a dominant theme in the teachers’ responses, that providing students with opportunities to meaningfully develop their ‘voice’ as writers, including writers of imaginative prose, is integral to thinking “about things that are intrinsically much more complex”. However, engaging in higher order thinking and conveying those deeper mechanisms of thought in sustained compositions is inherently difficult. As a literary practice, contextual based writing positions students to “draw from the text as a fictional or factual construct”, in responding to significant questions about the human condition. The capacity to unite conceptual thinking and cohesive, articulate prose is an ideal valued by teachers who see language as the “foundation”, “cornerstone” and “hearth” of human relationships. Embedded in humanist discourses, Ewan argues that using the text as a filter is “a very interesting way of positioning [students] as readers, and in understanding how to see things”. Writing is therefore, about responding and entering into critical or imaginative dialogue. Unfortunately this is a complex creative process that teachers perceive divides the “kids who do have those writing capacities and the kids who might have some basic ideas about the tools”. This division is significant to teachers who argue that creative writing is an imaginative tool that elicits the skills “we can’t live without” – empathy and understanding of self and others.

Teachers make a clear distinction, however, between the types of creative responses that are poorly conceived and those that ought to be celebrated as “an intelligent way to produce ideas [and] writing”. Ewan’s metaphor of some creative responses as little more than “some piece of garbage” is an emphatic point, which signifies his concern that creative writing is too often treated as an “easy way” of responding to contexts without literary merit or purpose. His caution is echoed in some teachers’ depictions of “airy fairy”, “angst riddles narratives” that
less accomplished writers, and less curious thinkers, produce. Simplistic narratives that show “no complexity in thinking” are rendered as meritless. The great divide in students’ capacity that Ewan alludes to is further evident in his censure of students who write “at year eight or nine level”, without regard for the implications and questions posed by the Context. Teachers are viewed as having an integral role in “pushing a lot harder” to help students realise what the Contexts are and how to respond to these. However, Ewan is also aware this view requires a significant curriculum shift and focus before Year 12, when “let’s be honest… there is very little you can do [and it’s] much too late”. The Australian Curriculum is viewed, as a possible harbinger of this shift “if it works the kids will be given writing tools”.

Finding an approach to assessment that more closely differentiates the quality of students’ responses is seen as the “hope” and “light” which will encourage creativity. Creative writing is constructed as a contentious literary practice by some of the teachers due to an inherent fear of the subjectivity around assessment, and teachers’ view of their own limited skills. Whilst some, particularly Mark and Joy, were relieved to see a more structured approach to writing, moving away from folio pieces that could be about any topic or style, their fears around subjectivity remained. On one hand writing about Contexts is valorised as a literary and linguistic enterprise, enabling the students to create pieces that are thought provoking and deeply considered. The consequence of a multifaceted approach to writing, however, is a pressure to assess writing in an objective way. There is a distinct conflict in the teachers’ depictions of teaching creative genres, whereby the aesthetic and subjectivity most prized is compromised by a need for objective sensibility. Kerrin’s reflection captures some of the ways teachers construct this view.

*I think the key problem is… it is challenging if perhaps teachers aren’t strong in the creative writing area and… certainly I don’t claim to be strong in that area but I think that’s quite confronting that… you can have a diverse range of forms of writing that as a teacher you’re required to make judgements on… But when you come to a broad spectrum of forms of writing all being assessed at the one time I think that’s quite challenging for a lot of teachers because you might have a creative piece of writing followed by a feature article, followed by an opinion piece or a speech… so you are dealing with a host of different forms and ideas and different types of language and all those types of things… there’s a degree of subjectivity in it, but when you’re marking say twenty-five text analysis essays you get a feel for where they sit in comparison to each other… We tend to, and our kids tend to, go safe and… to go for an expository essay, which they don’t do terribly well ‘cos it turns into a text analysis (chuckle), it doesn’t matter how many times you say “DON’T GO ON AND ON ABOUT THE TEXT”, they do!*
Kerrin establishes a view of text response assessment as an objective process with clear expectations, “you’re looking at the content, you’re looking at the ideas, and you’re looking for a certain structure, a certain level of language.” Ironically while many of these elements are part of assessing Contextual writing – ideas, language and structure remain paramount – the “degree of subjectivity” is disconcerting. The stylistic consistency of text response allows the teacher, from Kerrin’s perspective, to subjectively “get a feel for where [the essays] sit in comparison to each other”, lending the assessment an objectivity that is not possible when “you are dealing with a host of different forms and ideas [and] language and all those types of things”. She is cognisant of the conflicts that arise with moderation, and revels in telling stories of evocative pieces that divided her colleagues’ opinions, and others, which were “pedestrian”, yet valued as technically competent. Teachers emphasise the greater pressure they experience around judging the quality and merits of creative compositions. Quality creative compositions, particularly poetry and short stories, are depicted as akin to works of art, which are intellectually and emotionally subjective, and as an aesthetic, open to interpretation. The opportunity to respond imaginatively to literary ideas, thinking about the aesthetics of creative compositions is valued. Teachers describe the rare pieces that emotionally procured their empathy; the “lyrical” and “subtle” works that “touched” them as readers. However, while they might wish to encourage their students to compose and share their imagined worlds, there is an inherent difference between literary appreciation and an examiner’s critique. The aesthetic is part of the discourse of pleasure, and conversely, the exam is embedded in discourses about standards and performance.

Teachers’ perception of creative writing as “challenging” and “confronting” potentially contributes to the culture of expository writing they would ideally like their students to move beyond. Concerns about their students’ lack of confidence in writing dominate some teachers’ responses. Whilst many lament their students’ reluctance to be imaginative, they do not see these attitudes as also emanating from their own viewpoint. Kerrin’s assertion “we tend to, and our kids tend to, go safe”, constructs a view of the teacher as complicit in narrowing the students’ writing focus. However, the desired safety of the expository essay is also ironically portrayed as problematic. Teachers emphatically describe some of their students’ avoidance of creative genres in favour of unsuccessful expository forms, which are closer to text response essays. In contrast to the other teachers, Kerrin’s viewpoint is underpinned by a broader concern with “a lack of development [and] skill exposure” her students “being country kids” experience. Embedded in literacy discourses about the effects of rural isolation, her students are depicted as floundering writers, who “don’t do terribly well”. Their disadvantage is further compounded by a reliance on the teacher’s creativity, which most teachers emphasised is fundamental for teaching creative writing. Overcoming their own inhibitions and fear of “lacking imagination” or “ingenuity” is an endeavour most see as essential in order to
overcome the challenges they experience assessing and in helping their students to become better writers.

8.4 SUMMARY

Chapter Eight addresses the teachers’ views on reading and writing in relation to literature. Many of the teachers depicted literary approaches to reading and writing as entailing practices that aesthetically embody a “richness” of ideas and aesthetic expression that have shaped the evolution of human thought and ingenuity across times. Literary ways of reading and therefore, coming to know about the world are valorised by these teachers. Accounts of poverty in Dickens’s narratives, death in Shakespeare’s play, the satirical wit of Oscar Wilde, and the deep sentiment of feeling in Brontë and Austen were among those named as epitomising the ways in which literature can inform a greater understanding and appreciation of what defines the human condition. These teachers advocated that literature containing “the big ideas” – those ideas which provoke our engagement with more “worldly ideas” and develop our sense of self in relation to these – are a “cornerstone”, “hallmark”, and “at the heart of” what English studies have been in the past and to varying degrees will need to be in the future. There is a recognition in all of the teachers reflections that “English teaching concerns itself with textual work in and on the world” (Green, 2008, p.41), and literature occupies an important space in cultivating awareness of self and others.

Chapter Seven addresses how teachers construct literature and the ways this impacts on text selection, and Chapter Eight explores their views on reading and writing processes. Chapter Nine goes on to explore the ways in which teachers see the future of literature within the subject; the informing discourses and the themes and values underpinning how they see this. The nostalgic discourses of a former golden age, meet with the contemporary discourses of globalisation, as teachers prepare for a future demanding hope, creativity and sustainable living conditions.
CHAPTER NINE

THE FUTURE OF LITERARY ENGLISH

9.0 INTRODUCTION

Teachers’ reflections on the nature of English in the 21st century are underscored by a view of what English has been in the past and what it might become in the near and distant futures. Discourses related to democracy, globalisation, ethics and sustainability permeate the teachers’ descriptions of V.C.E. English as potentially moving away from a textually based subject toward one that is media centric, focusing less on literature and increasingly on language and communication.

Chapter Nine begins with an exploration of the nostalgic discourses teachers associate with a golden age when literature was valued as deepening students’ ‘appreciation’ of culture, and encouraged the pursuit of passion and pleasure. These heritage discourses are important in framing how teachers perceive the future of English teaching and the significance of literature within it. Literature is valued as a humanist aesthetic, which is particularly significant in influencing the formation of a society on the brink of a new era of global civilisation.

From nostalgic discourses, the discussion moves into an exploration of contemporary discourses informing literary practice. The discussion explores findings related to the research question, what significance do literary Englishes have in preparing students for global futures? An important aspect of this inquiry is a consideration of the discourses to do with citizenship, culture and new aesthetics that underpin future constructions. Discourses related to the effects of technology and globalisation significantly influence these teachers’ perceptions. The rapidly increasing use of social media is seen as enabling individuals to connect with each other and across the globe with a sense of immediacy both frightening and thrilling in its possibilities. Some teachers depict an Orwellian future in which an overreliance on technology and virtual online relationships might undermine humanity and erode interpersonal connections. Creating English subjects that nurture individual inquiry and a culture of tolerance, is particularly important to those worried about the impact of media and technology on human relationships.

The final section of this chapter explores the discourses of hope, tragedy, creativity and sustainability, which underpin teacher reflections on the future of senior English in Victoria. These discourses question the future place of literature in 21st century English practice. While literature remains valued in teachers’ perceptions of the future, it is depicted as jostling for significance and relevance alongside other texts and forms of communication demanded of citizenship in a global village. Caretaking the planet's ability to sustain human and ecological life-forms is a particularly important issue in teachers’ reflections, “driving”, “fuelling” and
“propelling” the need for future generations to possess “critical problem solving skills” and “communication capacities”. The English subjects from this perspective are seen as important in facilitating a generational shift. Foremost they are instrumental in creating ethical citizens capable of inhabiting one universal space despite their individual and cultural differences. Some of the teachers see the future as a greater unknown; in their stories the students are expected to become the cartographers of a world their teachers can conceivably imagine, but not predictably map. Providing opportunities to examine the human condition, and the heritage of ideas embedded in literature, is valued for cultivating students’ ability to see and articulate ideas about “a world not in boxes... but well connected”.

9.1 NOSTALGIC DISCOURSES: CULTURE, PASSION AND PLEASURE

Teachers situate their perceptions of the future partially within a valuing or recognition of what has evolved in the past. As evident in their discussions about reading (discussed in Chapter 8), comments about culture come strongly through in their reflections on the importance of literature in creating a future society predicated on values of cultural tolerance and citizenship. Furthermore, passion and pleasure remains central to how they think about the future. English subjects are perceived as dynamic intellectual and creative spaces, responding to the issues embedded “in each historic age”, creating an archive of ideas to be inherited by future generations. Literary study within this context is valorised because it enables students to question the writer’s interpretation and experience of the world in a particular time and place that readers are no longer operating within, but are invariably informed by. The teachers’ constructions of literature as a moral and ethical aesthetic underpin their view of its relevance to 21st century English subjects. Encapsulated within nostalgic and classicist discourses, the future of literary tradition is defined by a capacity to culturally, spiritually and intellectually foster students’ deeper realisation of their own and others’ humanity. Literature is depicted as an antidote to cultural impoverishment, an “intensely beautiful expression” of language and human thought. This is juxtaposed to images of a “dumbing down”, which some implied might become the future. Social media and network programming are seen by some teachers as potentially creating a society lacking deeper appraisal of current affairs through “neglect of substantial reading” and “waning skills of critique”. The distant future looms as an “unknown territory” and as a potentially dystopian society; a future in which the beauty of language and narrative might continue to diminish. The “discovery of good literature”, the way it personally and culturally speaks to the reader and inspires passionate dialogue, is for these teachers, a justification of why it should remain central in English. Literature is ultimately perceived as integral to the preservation of cultural diversity and the articulation of ideas in a homogenised global context.
The study of the literary canon, as opposed to other works of fiction, is viewed as potentially more enduring in a society where new voices are "constantly generated" yet also "forgotten and discarded" amidst the "the hustle and bustle" and "flurry and hurry" of online self-publishing. The literary masters of the "classical traditions" from the "great age of the Elizabethans" to the "elegant Victorians" are esteemed as worthy of "ongoing human interest" and "revival if they should – I dare not think – fall away". Literary authors including Shakespeare, Bronte, Dickens, Blake and Tennyson feature in teachers' reflections on the kinds of literature that will "endure beyond our memory", "keep burning in people's hearts" and "keep speaking to the human conscience of right and wrong". Whilst the static form of the printed text is perceived as an "endangered form" in a technological future, the world within the classical text is depicted as part of an ongoing dialogue about the human condition, bridging the past and evolving future. This thematic pattern is evident in teachers' frequent contrasts between the views and values in classical texts and their contemporary connections. Teachers draw parallels between the industrial, class and social conflicts of the Victorian age, and the extreme disparities of wealth and living conditions "across the globe today". Teachers likewise see connections between the discourses of poverty, gender and faith in Dickens' and Bronte's novels and those resonating in contemporary times. In Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and 'King Lear' some teachers see the "wise warning" and "inherent wisdom" that "is as true today as it was yesterday" when examining modern war and familial conflicts. Studying these conflicts might "be all the more powerful" and "resonate more deeply" when told in 500 year old tales than modern works that "have yet to stand the test of time". Canonical literature is afforded a special worth by these teachers; they affirm, challenge, strengthen and at times weaken the ideologies society is predicated upon. These writers are esteemed for how "they often radically responded to their environments", and became producers of meaning that continue to resonate with modern readers. In a technological landscape that many of the teachers predict will require English students to be the creators and designers of texts as opposed to readers, literature is particularly affirmed as "the voices of human ingenuity", connecting with students' "real world" understanding of their experiences.

Literature is also valorised as a humanist aesthetic that will continue to be significant in the "forthcoming age" and "brave new world" of independent inquiry in which individuals will need to "independently", "actively" and "proactively" search for personal meaning. Whilst some of the teachers saw the future as radically different in "50 to 100 years", potentially involving a new form of English language and texts, the continued study of canonical literature was seen by Mary, Ewan, Mark, Grace and Kerrin as "always relevant even in contemporary times". The human tapestry of emotions, most poignantly its pleasures and its tragedies, was seen as an inevitable dimension of human nature, and "the stuff of great literature and the enduring substance of modern guff". Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', Bronte's 'Jane Eyre', Tolstoy's
'Anna Karenina' and Dickens' 'Great Expectations' were suggested as examples of what will remain relevant, even though other forms of literature were seen as potentially diminishing in importance and representation. A future devoid of a literary canon is ideologically depicted as a world intellectually impoverished and deprived of passion and pleasure, which is “naturally evoked” through literature as art and aesthetic. Teachers use bleak imagery when describing what might become of English: “it would certainly be gloomy”, “a study for robots”, “without a soul”, “devoid of heart” and “lost... after all where there is Lit there's bliss”. Literature is portrayed as a vehicle for self-understanding, offering characters with depths of emotion and conscience, which unlike popular culture propels the reader toward introspection. The teachers’ nostalgic discourses infer that to intellectually and emotionally understand one’s own predicament, an individual must have a greater sense of their story: love, loss, tragedy and sorrow, within the larger context of what is humanly possible and encapsulated in great romances and tragedies like ‘Tristan and Isolde’, ‘Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘Macbeth’. Literature as an aesthetic is particularly portrayed as being able to offer the kind of self-reflection and quest for personal meaning that is necessary in a potentially dehumanised future society. Some teachers envision the future as "a modern dystopia" in which technology “slowly erodes”, “unknowingly lessens” or “insidiously infiltrates” genuine human connections. Whilst global technologies are praised for sustaining interpersonal connections through Skype, Facebook and even games like Words with Friends, there is a converse concern that if students are not taught how to understand media and govern it as a form of sociality, individuals will become more isolated. A tendency to live online, and a Facebook culture that is mistaken for significant interaction, are seen as the potential by-products of societies in which students are virtually situated and “emotionally” isolated. Living in a global context, however, is seen to necessitate a moral imperative in which culturally and socially aware citizens co-exist and collaborate with others on issues of social justice and action that have “plagued” prior generations and will foreseeably, exist in the future. Issues related to identity, power, war, and human relations are viewed as part of human evolution, and the ability to address these issues is necessary to future human ingenuity. Literature is valorised therefore, for its capacity to open the world to scrutiny, by providing lenses through which the problems of the present and possibilities of the future can be understood as intrinsic to the genealogy of human thought and development.

A shift away from a literary model of V.C.E. English to one embedded in everyday communication and social transaction, is viewed by some teachers as a “forthcoming reality” that is potentially unwise. Aside from the value of the literary canon as a compass for society’s moral growth, literature is valued too as a timeless pursuit of pleasure that reminds us of what it means to be beautiful as human beings. Many of the teachers, especially Mary, Joy and Kerrin, describe literature in loving terms. Their “passion” and “love” of reading is particularly evident in their depictions of the influence their English teachers and/or the books they read as young
women had on shaping their professional lives and personal passions as readers. For these teachers, the future is depicted as tainted by the possible loss of a rich literary aesthetic, which undermines the emotional aspects of the human condition. Emotional discourses about literature as a “genuine source of beauty and pleasure”, enriching the lives of human beings, pervade their reflections on the future. Whilst the visions of the future they create fall short of an apocalyptic vision, they nonetheless resonate with dehumanised images of a society driven by technology and gratification of immediate needs and potentially devoid of the deeper reflection and meaning that makes human beings unique. Reading, it is suggested, needs to be more than a scholarly pursuit of academic ideas or a functional approach to literacy.

The senior English subjects are portrayed as serving an ideological purpose in leading students to some kind of self-fulfilment, which is derived from that pleasurable encounter between reader and text. Teachers talk of the past in nostalgic terms, creating fable like constructions of English in which pleasure “of the written word”, the “sheer beauty” and the “richness” of the English language was indulged. These versions of English, from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, mythologise a past “founded upon” and “built around” an intrinsic appreciation of literature and language. Their stories, some of which are personal memories of their childhood as opposed to ‘historical’ times, valorise literary practices concerned with rhetoric and recitation. Being able to recite soliloquies and epic poems such as ‘The lady of Shallot’ alongside being able to debate a philosophical viewpoint, belong to versions of senior English subjects in which literature up-skilled students, whilst achieving another ideological purpose; cultivating “a sensitive appreciation” of language and prose. Motifs of compassion, philosophy, love and sensitivity are deeply valued human qualities pertinent to teachers’ stories of what these fabled literary Englishes embraced, and what the English subjects of the future will need to cultivate. Literary Englishes “in some form or another” are seen as a humanising antidote to the potential isolation and immediate gratification that might arise from a competitive, global and virtual environment.

9.2 CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES: REALISM, TECHNOLOGY AND GLOBALISATION

Whilst an appreciation of literature is generally important in the teachers’ depiction of future English studies, there were some who envisioned a future in which literary inquiry might invariably lessen in response to an emphasis on the relationship between media, language and persuasion. Mary, Mark, Joy and Kerrin's perceptions of English are steeped in ideological discourses that see the past as the epitome of a golden age of literature and language, potentially declining in the present and endangered in the future. For others, particularly Norah and Ella, the desirability of the centrality of literature is more questionable. These teachers suggest English needs to shift toward a more realistic orientation, becoming a communications subject,
rich in the study of language and persuasion as opposed to literary content and aesthetics. In conceptually uniting a study of language and reading, in a subject described as “fluid”, “flexible” and “innovative”, English is seen by these teachers as inevitably becoming language and media centric. Establishing a “compromise between the relevant contemporary texts... and classic literature” is viewed as part of a more ‘realistic’ and balanced approach to reading, writing and critical thinking. In this view inferential reading skills, as opposed to literary appreciation, are viewed as the desired outcome of senior English studies. Students need opportunities to grapple with “real life” through the world of the text, whilst simultaneously extending their capabilities to think and “critically imagine” life beyond the limitations of its characters and themes. Teachers consider some selected contemporary and canonical texts too philosophical (the ‘The Life of Pi’ as an example) or culturally and linguistically estranged from future contexts, or irrelevant in a subject grounded in realism as opposed to “abstract fantasy”.

There is a perceived generational shift in many teachers’ reflections from the “old days” when English was a literary subject in comparison “to our time” and “the coming times” that is challenging not only students’ reading patterns but also the identity of the ‘traditional’ English teacher as “the wise guide” or “the literary expert”. Ella particularly differentiates between the past as pertaining to a literary model of English and the future as one distinctly non-literary, influenced by new generations of English teachers who are unlike the ‘default’ practitioners of the past – “people who love literature”. In this context, the literary tradition is one that is seen as “endangered”, or challenged by the need to remain “authentic”. A pattern emerges in teachers’ reflections in which their profession is depicted as undergoing a “metamorphosis”. Teachers who identify with literary traditions are “like changelings”, “fading into mythology” and “struggling to stay part of the main plot” in their profession’s master narrative. Literary tradition is depicted in semantic categories belonging to war. Teachers have to “battle” to keep “literature on the radar”, engaging in “a war of words” to justify their decisions and “raise the flag” when it would be “easier to accept weary defeat”. For these teachers literature is “worth fighting for”, and should “be recognised for its contribution to education”. Conceptually literature is perceived as “intrinsically” and “inherently” relevant to citizens who will become producers of meaning, able to receive, process and respond to ideas from a plethora of literary and non-literary voices.

These teachers’ futuristic versions of English subjects are steeped not only in visions of what the past has been, but also differentiated in terms of what the current climate of English teaching encompasses. The impact of technologies dominate the teachers’ reflections on how the present, as part of a “digital revolution”, is shaping a technological future in which online learning platforms, the media and essential communication will feature more prevalently in senior English subjects. Technology is envisioned as shifting “the way in which the world works” and
by extension the way classrooms have typically worked in the past, and will need to operate in the future. Some fear the virtual teacher is already an omnipresent reality, configured through the use of Skype in distance education and the increasing prevalence of online learning platforms, blogs and wikis. For others, like Ella Norah, there is less conflict in broadening their classrooms from physical spaces to virtual environments. In part these teachers’ viewpoints are ensconced in progressive democratic discourses, in which a “technology mediated English education” ensures the productivity of a society that can meet and also invent its future demands. The focus of technology from this perspective is not on teaching students how to use its software and platforms, but rather on how to “think with it” and to use it “creatively and innovatively”. Contemporary and future teaching practices are portrayed as an interactive nexus in which the physical and online classroom spaces co-exist simulating real-life sharing of voices, re-negotiating past ideas about the authority of the printed text.

Underlying these teachers’ reflections on technology is also a view of the English subjects as having an ethical responsibility to effect social change. Their viewpoints emphasise the intensifying need for students to ideologically understand “the discourses of our times” and “the machinations of social politics”. Online environments are regarded as inherently problematic; issues of expert authority and false virtual identities make it more difficult for students to interrogate the source of ideas and judge their merit. Conversely the breadth of ideas they are exposed to can also be seen as mitigating these potential disadvantages: students are not bound to the authority of the teacher, the text or a limited set of study materials. Furthermore, their audience is not artificially limited to the classroom, through self-publishing they are actively contributing to society's dialogue on human affairs and critique of literary texts. Teachers use metaphors of change, “shifting tides”, “changing times” and “new directions” to describe the dynamic ways in which learning relationships have changed. The democratic responsibility of the English teacher is to demonstrate how to navigate this world. By allowing students to negotiate meaning and response “relationships based on respect are built”, “ideas are generated not controlled” and “new texts with new voices join those of the past”. For some teachers, such as Mark, there is a need for caution; this postmodern turn in education in which “everyone’s opinion is valid” has potential conflict. For others the possibility to move beyond interpretation to signifying meaning in ‘real-life’ contexts is an “exciting hallmark” of evolving Englishes. Through blogs, wikis and online forums students’ sense of learning expands beyond a conceptualisation of it as “something that happens [in the] classroom” to a realisation of what it means to be “life-long learners”. Critiquing others’ viewpoints is important, yet it is the composite action of independently forming a voice and contributing to social action that is emphasised. The terms “empowerment” and “empowered” emerge across the teachers’ reflections on what future English courses might aspire to achieve. Literary constructions are valued for promoting an exploration of issues, most significantly
those of race, gender, and poverty. The use of technology and social media in V.C.E. English, alongside literary study, is seen as further empowering students and teachers to re-address social justice issues that might otherwise “fade into the background”, or “not be brought into the light”.

English is viewed as shifting from content driven designs toward a new kind of knowledge economy: one that is essentially democratic and concerned with critical thinking and “real world” response. Whilst Mary forewarns that “handwriting is a technology too” that needs to be practised, the static nature of the handwritten essay in response to the text is envisioned as becoming increasingly antiquated. The problem with literature in a subject conceived as becoming more akin to language and communication is not necessarily the printed text, but rather how students are asked to interact with it. As opposed to heralding the death of literary Englishes, technology is seen by others as integral to its preservation. Poetry, novels, films and plays, while potentially endangered, are not seen as necessarily obsolete in future paradigms. However, teachers are positioned as needing to be flexible and adaptive in how they communicate around texts and interact with their students as co-critics and fellow readers. Teachers’ capacity to respond to this technological change and adapt to teaching with new modes of communication, is seen as possible in light of past developments. The introduction of Film study, as “the first generation”, of technological change in English, is depicted as expanding students’ opportunities to think about visual language, symbolism and meaning in new ways. Finding a way to work with literature “for the next generation” is seen as “not so distinct” or “necessarily improbable” in light of the first generation. Literary English is primarily depicted in hopeful imagery as “like water in a Summer garden”, “the stars in a dark sky” and “the earth’s invisible beat”. Sustaining a literary culture in a modern world is “not a problem with the stimulus”, but rather with “the intentionality”, and “the practices” surrounding it. Allowing students to work with adaptations, and create their own responses in non-print forms is seen as enabling a greater discussion around ideas, language and “how all these elements intersect like a spider’s web”.

Teachers, especially Mary, Grace and Kerrin, create a democratic view of English teaching as a learning community centred on exploring and creating new ideas. The futures they depict “where there is constant fusion” and “synergising of new ideas” are extensions of the innovations they currently see as shaping their teaching practice. Technology is portrayed as already enabling their classes to think more broadly about texts. Examining language and perspectives is enriched through opportunities to compare and contrast these to other forms of art, text and commentary made available through online museums, film archives, libraries and repositories. Media forums such as Moodle and Facebook, and sites like Goodreads allow students to communicate with authentic literary audiences who have also read or viewed the
Joining these discussions gives them “the freedom” to share their thoughts with an audience, whose intense passions or disappointments with the text might “really make them go ‘Wow!’” or challenge them to “speak out and say that’s just not okay”. Social media, although not regarded as a replacement for class and small group discussion, is viewed as an important communication tool of the future. The use of Twitter, although none claimed to be using it, arose in several teachers’ depictions of a futuristic approach to having students discuss the text. Tools like Twitter were seen as having potential for students to update their reading progress, by creating a short sharp unfolding view of their thoughts and feelings about the text, the writing, the characters and other aspects.

A focus on active reading and open dialogue significantly informs many teachers’ constructions of English. The kinds of reading valued in past Engishes are framed as valuable “academic” enterprises, yet “less authentic” in “realistic terms”. Reading in the past is narrowly depicted as being more concerned with uncovering and reproducing the ideas in texts as opposed to generating new meaning. Whilst some teachers saw value in writing an essay-based response and believed that “it will remain core” to textual study, others argued for “rethinking” how central such approaches should be. The essay is valued as a summative, not a formative process in future constructions of English. Encouraging the reader to articulate their thoughts in sustained compositions should “artfully avoid reproductions” and allow for a deeper realisation about how texts work and the ideas about the human condition they embody. Using classroom blogs and wikis is seen as part of the “essential” formative process that helps students conceptually grapple with the text and allows the teacher and student to democratically negotiate new meaning. Online spaces create opportunities for conversation about ideas, taking away the prohibitions and inhibitions of classroom text study in which the teacher is the expert and the student feels obligated to perform specific readings of “what the teacher expects”. Many teachers, particularly Mary, Kerrin and Grace, suggested therefore, that providing opportunities to socially mediate reading and response is less contrived and more likely to “reap”, “yield” and “generate” thought. These approaches were seen as mirroring natural reading habits in which the reader's thoughts might dwell on an aspect of character, plot or feeling the text has evoked, without “over analysing” or deconstructing all of its component elements.

9.3 FUTURE DISCOURSES: HOPE, TRADITION, CREATIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Teachers’ perspectives on the future of English are complex constructions that are sometimes contradictory. There is a temptation for some to simply map the future as a familiar and comforting reinvention of the present. For others there is a desire to reclaim a glorious past, whilst some look forward to a subject that is innovative in its approach to language, textuality
and student engagement. In more general terms several teachers perceive the future of English as a harbinger of hopeful possibilities whilst for a few it is tainted by the potential loss of literary traditions. Their story is collectively a resignation to the fact that English subjects are historically open to change. However, there is a sense of purpose in their “determination to soldier on”, “to sail with the winds” and “get to the bottom of it”, which acknowledges their belief too that what is most important and valued has always remained part of English: a commitment to texts and language.

The current clime in English is portrayed as tenuous: “the door’s unhinged”, “the horse has already bolted”, and “there’s a lot of uncertainty on the horizon”. Despite this turbulent mood, there is also a forthright hopefulness in teachers’ response to change. Current debates about language, texts and multimodality are informed by teachers’ perceptions of how languages have evolved “from the dark ages” and “the depths of antiquity”. Significant changes to Australian English and the increasing diversity in how language is visually represented is potentially seen as part of “a natural civilised evolution” of language. Teachers juxtapose contemporary multimodal and linguistic developments against “historical evidence” that suggests language is inherently unstable and visually symbolic, citing Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Picts’ etchings and Aboriginal cave paintings as examples of this evolution. However, despite some teachers’ perceptions that change is often a sign of “civilising culture”, there is a preoccupation in other teachers’ accounts about avoiding a “dumbing down” of textual tradition and a pressing need to “get the balance right”, “keep the lighthouse on”, “keep the boat afloat” and “not throw the baby out with the bathwater”. In adapting English courses there is a preoccupation too about what happens to English as a written and oral tradition; as Mark declares “English is not an electronic language”. There is a cautionary measure in teachers’ accounts about needing to maintain a linguistic and textual heritage, and not simply rush from the printed page to online screen. While Mark, Mary, Joy and Grace believe the escapist pleasure of reading books will ensure they endure, there is also a recognition that language and aesthetics will evolve to encompass other forms of reading. Their view of print literature is a romantic one in which “the material world fades away, and the reader enters ‘the world of the book’ and is completely absorbed” (Goodwyn, 2013b, p. 151). However, schools are pressurised environments responsible for teaching individuals who will work in undiscovered careers, and address issues of sustainability and global cooperation unprecedented in past ages. Issues of equality, culture and tolerance are seen as “epitomising what the new age is about” and justifying the need for creative and democratic approaches to rethinking tradition. Whilst a culture of printed text and critique is the “legacy” of current traditions, it is a culture of creativity that is seen as defining future Englishes.

When teachers imagine the future they construct senior English courses in which texts and
language will continue to evolve. Multimodal texts, particularly graphic novels, are viewed by some teachers as posing both an exciting development in textual study and a challenge to the “old guard” of classical texts and printed literature. Allowing students to interpret and design meaning through experimentation with visual, aural and written modes is depicted as fundamental in both literary and non-literary modes of English. Working with multimodal texts is particularly valorised as an opportunity to participate in creative processes and dialogue (Kress, 2006a; Zancanella, Hall & Price, 2000). It is the development and practice of these multimodal skills, which is seen as most significantly shaping the future of English differently to the past. Genres like anime and graphic novels “popular now” are seen by some teachers as potentially becoming “the new literatures” later generations will “endorse”, “approve” or “admit to the hallowed halls”. As opposed to e-books, which many saw as a phenomenon likely to “fizzle” or “bubble over”, and as “merely an adaptation of page to screen”, other multimodal texts generated significant discussion. E-books were essentially described as a reproduction of the printed text, requiring no significant diversification to reading patterns. Interacting with multimodal and graphic texts by contrast was described in energised metaphors of “firing up the neurons”, and “starting up the ignition”. Teachers describe the appeal of these texts: colour, sound, movement, and language “stimulate the senses”, “invite interaction”, “foster engagement” and “take you inside the text”. Additionally, from a sustainable viewpoint, their often online format appeals to Generation Y and Generation Next in more “fundamentally principled ways”. In a climate of declining natural resources they are often ‘paper friendly’, responding to the altruistic ethics of generations whose “informed environmental conscience” is necessary to their future survival. Steeped in progressive, democratic discourses, some teachers see these more “innovative” and “interactive” modes of language and text as redefining not only English subjects in Victoria, but also “how we fundamentally record our history” if the “big books of the past” cease to be.

Despite the challenges of modernity, a heritage discourse subtly frames some teachers’ perspectives of literature. This is particularly evident in some teachers’ defence of literary English, even though students’ interest in reading, aside from a “privileged few”, is predicted as potentially waning further. Literature is portrayed as surviving the “technological age”, “the resistance of Generation Next” and the “doomsayers”, unlikely to become “extinct” or “dead like Latin and the Romans”, although it might “be on the critical list” and in need of “an eventual renaissance”. Whilst teacher librarians Mark, Mary and Joy conceive genres like graphic novels becoming the literature of the future, alternative texts are generally described by others in lesser metaphors to literature: “they haven’t proved their metal”, “they might be a flash in the pan” and “like when special effects wear off they might reveal the plot is pretty thin”. Popular fiction and young adult literature is regarded slightly more highly, “having a better survival rate in the history books”. As opposed to new multimodal forms, these texts are
valued because of the perceived qualities they have in common. This is evident in teachers’ descriptions of “quality fiction” as “potentially more substantial”, with “more grit”, and related to literature in terms of being “the steerage class”, “of the same genus”, or “at least distant cousins” of more literary texts. However, it is clearly literature that teachers valorise as an enduring feature of senior English. Whilst Hateley (2013) argues young adult literature might be used as a tool for exploring ideology, socialisation and acculturation, these teachers have a limited view of its potential in contrast to other literature. Literature is described in metaphors, which testify to its heritage and possible survival: it is a “Holy Grail”, “grand old dame”, “majesty of fiction”, “the two hat chef restaurant” and “the human tome”. Although the centrality of literature is questioned, teachers imagine literary constructions will survive, “never having been absent” from the fabled English subjects they perceive as historically treasured in the past. The motif of “victory”, evident in Grace and Joy’s triumphant accounts of how the profession “trumped the bureaucrats” when the number of texts in V.C.E. English was to be reduced, is proof of their hope for the future. The inclusion of literature as a Strand in the Australian Curriculum draft for English was seen by some, including Ewan and Kerrin, as further prioritising literature within English. Literary modes of reading are envisioned as not only surviving in English studies but also remaining integral to its landscape as new genres challenge its frontiers. Ultimately, English without text study is depicted as the “degradation of the heritage”, “academic rigour” and “higher purpose” of English instruction.

Whilst literature is seen as surviving “the brave new world”, and “future frontier”, reimagining what constitutes the literary canon is viewed as a significant challenge for educators. The idea of a canon is particularly seen as challenging given online self-publishing and text repositories are creating broader exposure to texts for readers, and a wider audience for writers. Teachers spoke of “old” and “new” canons, suggesting that some texts will remain valued, whilst others will change to include new voices. The British canon, and a selected few American authors, are viewed as having a largely undisputed claim in senior English and Literature courses, yet their cultural relevance to Australian contexts is seen as challenged by draft designs of the Australian Curriculum, and a general view of what the future holds. Embedded in globalised discourses about sustainability of human relations and environments, these teachers imagine future canons as needing to ethically embody “a greater inclusivity of literature” from other cultures and contexts. The canon is something that “doesn’t so much exist” but is “socially and historically agreed upon”, and reinforced through the policies and initiatives that shape society, and English education as one of its institutions. Most of the teachers were conscious of the focus on Sustainability in the draft of the Australian Curriculum’s design for English; however, they saw the focus on stewardship and conservation as an already deeply embedded issue in society’s ethical conscience, which forthcoming generations will need the ingenuity to resolve. Texts with sustainable themes about connections to land, conservation and preservation of human life
were seen as already developing prominence in course designs particularly through the inclusion of Indigenous texts and apocalyptic novels in junior and middle years. However, the issue of studying international voices in literature, as a means of sustaining human relationships in a "pluralistic society", was seen as a more pressing dynamic to address.

An appreciation of international texts and voices was seen as already partially embedded in English studies from junior to senior years with texts such as ‘Chinese Cinderella’, ‘The Kite Runner’, ‘The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif’ and ‘Mao’s Last Dancer’ included in text selections. However, establishing a global canon beyond popular best sellers was seen as complicated by two concerns: a future generation of English teachers who might not be literary readers, and the implications of working with global texts. The first was emphasised as a more imperative issue, with the survival of existing “good literature”, “gritty lit”, “the big guns”, “the classics” already jeopardised by graduating teachers who have not studied Shakespeare and other classicists. Whilst cultural inclusivity is considered central to fostering a kind of “global ethics”, “universality of experience” or tolerance of “universal cultures”, making judgments about what constitutes “international literature” or “new classics” is reliant on an existing culture of literary readership. Furthermore, broadening the canon requires literature to maintain a voice of authority, which might lessen living in a technologically connected “global village” in which access to worldviews is immediately available. In one sense, the teachers’ definition of international literature was defined as works written by overseas authors about issues, themes and events in their own immediate contexts. However, others, especially Mary, adopted a more liberal and tolerant view of what constitutes international literature, valuing the perspectives of foreigners and outsiders, “after all we are global citizens”, or “people of the world”. The issue is “not who writes the text... but how it is written” and “how it speaks to the human conscience”. In order to provide an “authentic” experience and to “open the world”; some teachers argued this new canon should expose students to interesting foreign voices, particularly those which promote tolerance of Asia-Pacific relations and Islamic contexts. Expanding the canon to also include a wider representation of indigenous texts alongside other selections such as holocaust and refugee memoirs was also claimed to be an essential part of “a new age of social justice” and awareness in English based disciplines.

Defining new literatures, however, is not only a consideration of theme and voice, but also of changing definitions of a literary aesthetic. Novels such as ‘The Book Thief’ and fables like ‘The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas’ were provided as some examples of what “new literatures” might be. Structurally both texts are unique. In ‘The Book Thief’, the device of using Death as the narrator propels the reader to question life by “realising from the first page that they are going to die”. In ‘The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas’, the fable like structure offers a different perspective on the Holocaust; that of an ‘innocent’ German child whose father is a Nazi
perpetrator. New literatures are depicted as “symbolically throwing open the door”, and “inviting the reader into the world of the text”, through narrative voice, structure, symbolism and style that sometimes “like the literary masters” can “break new ground”, “awaken something inside readers” and “make the world anew”. This idea of making the world anew through ideas and language is a recurring motif in teachers’ reflections. Graphic novels such as ‘Maus’ are described as possibly representing a new literature: they are philosophically engaging and sophisticated in conveying meaning. As a new aesthetic and engaging medium, several teachers argue their inclusion in English studies is inevitable and possibly enriching the traditions of text study. Whilst literature, particularly canonical literary texts, is viewed as privileged, these newer genres are seen as accessible to younger generations adept at filtering messages in spoken, visual and written modes. Graphic novels offer ways of aesthetically working with texts traditionally connected to literary practice: deconstructing symbolism, experimenting with plot and structures, interrogating syntax and probing characterisation and themes. Furthermore, as symbolic representations of meaning, they potentially offer more creative modes of response. To encounter new aesthetics is depicted as ultimately scaffolding “new ways to think with language” and to “see through texts to the other side” and to know “that relationship between text, language and reader is what English is about”.

9.4 SUMMARY

Chapter Nine presented an overview of teachers’ depictions of the place of literature in future English, calling on past, present and future discourses with concomitant representations of literature, alongside other forms of textuality. The teachers’ views were organised around three dominant sets of discourses. The first of these discourses nostalgically emphasised the ongoing significance of past traditions in shaping the future of English. Heritage discourses were particularly pertinent in their reflections, though to varying degrees, creating portraits of a future English that values past traditions whilst simultaneously reimagining these for life in a global village. The second set of discourses focused more on ways in which questions surrounding globalisation and citizenship in a global village might be addressed by literature. Different ideas about what constitutes citizenship and ethical behaviour shape the teachers’ reflections on the “hidden curriculum” of English subjects in Victoria and elsewhere, regardless of how English will come to be configured in future policies. Their considered reflections on the connections between the purpose of English and future designs recognise the importance of thinking “conceptually and critically about what we do and what we’re aiming for” (McGraw, 2012, p. 103). Through the immediacy and outreach of social media and new technologies, the world is envisioned by these teachers as becoming an increasingly smaller community, governed by an ethical culture of tolerance and global accountability. The term “global village” is a recurring metaphor in teachers’ reflections, alluding to a future in which global citizenship will be more
important than local and national contexts. While technological and global discourses are particularly significant in re-framing how teachers envision working with non-literary texts, it is this idea of a global village that some believe necessitates the presence of a literary culture in English. The third set of discourses relate to how teachers imagine the future world their students will inhabit, and how literature contributes to their capacities to innovatively shape the future. As discussed in Chapter Eight, literary Englishes are associated with humanising ideals of pleasure, passion and creativity. Chapter Nine explores how significant these literary ideals are to creating and working within a global community. Literary Englishes are portrayed as significant, to varying degrees, in ensuring future generations of adults have the capacity to create and reimagine the future anew. Democratic ideals particularly remain present in how they envision the future of English and the contribution it makes in terms of tolerance, hope and ethics.

Chapter Ten significantly highlights the significance of these discourses in terms of how English is constructed and reimagined. Chapter Ten draws these threads together, considering the significance of the discourses in how English is constructed and what this says about the future. There are diverse constructions of English evident in these teachers’ depictions. Chapter Ten is a collective summary of the main themes and discourses that underpin their literary constructions of English, as elucidated in Chapters Six to Nine. Furthermore, Chapter Ten contextualises the significance of these findings in relation to the broader questions framing the future of English.
CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

10.0 INTRODUCTION

Historically the English subjects are sites of innovation and creativity: a landscape of ideas, pedagogies and practices embedded in broader discourses concerned with identity, aesthetics, and democracy. The current educational climate in Australia is fraught with the tensions and possibilities a major curriculum shift toward a national curriculum evokes. Whilst the Australian Curriculum’s review of Senior curriculum had little impact on V.C.E. English, in comparison to Years 7 to 10, it is worth noting that the V.C.E. English subjects are periodically reviewed and reflect key concerns about language and textuality. V.C.E. English was reviewed again in 2014, and a new Study Design will be implemented from 2016. These tensions around language, texts and the purpose of English, which pervade teachers accounts, are magnified by their intense feeling that the issues surrounding English and literature in Australia are part of a wider professional discussion happening in English subjects elsewhere. In conceptualising the present and in thinking about the future, these teachers imagine English subjects in which new textual traditions will evolve, potentially challenging, and also enriching, the study of literature. A creative appreciation of the aesthetic, and a critical mindfulness of reading as an interpretive act is depicted as possibly deepening the relevance of literary study in English classrooms as a microcosm of the global village. As teachers imagine a global, virtual future, they reconfigure English as a space of democratic diversity and textual richness in which students are preparing to be empathetic, culturally tolerant designers of meaning. This creates an exciting kind of tension in which literary traditions might be reconsidered, and hopefully reinvigorated. Goodwyn’s (2000) allusion to Ulysses’ determination to be “a bringer of good things” (p. 4) is holds true for the vision and intentions of the teachers in this study. In an era of discordant discourses, these teachers are constructing V.C.E. English in ways that resist narrowing its borders and offer hope and rejuvenation for its future territory.

The tensions surrounding English in Victoria, are part of much broader professional debates about the identity of English and the significance, or rather status, of literature within these. The revised VCE English course for Year 12 in 2008 presented a new way of structuring two key areas, calling for a different way of conceptualising reading and response. This provided the occasion for the study, bringing to the fore concerns regarding the nature of V.C.E. English that were already there but now more visible. The introduction of the revised V.C.E. English course as teachers struggled to bring this into being particularly enabled me to explore some of the ways English is being challenged that have resonance in other contexts too. I set out to understand whether literature matters to teachers of V.C.E. English, a generalist course that is
offered in many schools alongside an equivalent subject titled Literature. The principle finding of this study showed that, similar to Goodwyn’s (2010) findings, teachers of V.C.E. English such as those in this study personally and professionally believe in the importance of literature within English, but they value and understand it in different ways.

The chapter begins by summarising findings related to the key themes and discourses that reveal their position on the value of reading and responding to literature in V.C.E. English. The introduction of new elements into the course in 2007, particularly the Creating and Presenting outcome in addition to Reading and Responding, provided opportunities for teachers to work with literary texts in traditional styles of text response, and in terms of conceptualising universal Contexts. This provided an effective site for exploring the overarching research question: how do teachers discursively construct literary representations of V.C.E. English. What I found was that teachers representation of these are nested in other understandings about how they perceive the purpose of English, conceptualise literature, and think about past traditions and future predictions.

The first section of this chapter, synthesising the findings of Chapters Six to Nine, comprises several summaries of key themes and discourses that shape teachers’ constructions of literature and English teaching. In section two, the chapter concludes with a reflective commentary on the significance and implications of these findings for the present and future state of English, and of literature teaching within it.

10.1 KEY THEMES AND CENTRAL ISSUES

V.C.E. English is represented in teachers’ reflections as enriching students’ lives and deepening their connections to the world. There is an underlying view of English as cultivating a culture of Enlightenment, in which personal growth is nurtured and social values realised (Medway, 2010). The art of reading and appreciation, perceived as historically central to English, is an instrument of self and social transformation. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is described though journey metaphors of students as “sojourners”, “embarking”, “exploring” and “discovering” their world through reading, interpretation and composition. A transformative view is further evident in teachers’ patterned ways of describing V.C.E. English as “world opening” and “broadening horizons”. Teachers viewed English as a microcosm of the real world, encouraging students to be independent thinkers. However, some saw the official curriculum as significantly impinging on the creative potential to achieve this. Whilst values of conceptual thinking and self-growth are overtly articulated in the V.C.E. English Study Design, many, with the exclusion of Ewan, felt these values were sometimes constrained by the imposing demands of the assessment regime. Four of the teachers asserted a view that V.C.E. English, as a compulsory general subject “taking all comers”, ought to embrace a spirit
of inclusivity, inspiring the development of human ingenuity and positive social relations. Their ideals were often juxtaposed to conflicting descriptions of education by “edupreneurs”, and a bureaucracy, which they suggest misrepresent the values, practices and aims of V.C.E. English. This perceived tension between government, policy-makers and educators, which some described in metaphors of imprisonment and labour, is an issue they expressed a desire to resolve. However, many, including Assessors Joy and Grace, saw this divide between the “abject realities” of examination and the “high-flying” ideals of English practice, as inevitably irreconcilable.

The rhetoric of pragmatism in the Study Design; English must focus on skill development, language and literacy was viewed by many of the teachers as potentially justified, although their view of how this should be achieved is at odds with the policy makers. There was a pattern of resistance in teachers’ reflections to a perceived “lowering of the bar”, and “dumbing down” of the intellectual rigour, language demands and textual traditions of English. The ‘post-modern lite’ controversy featured strongly in their arguments, juxtaposed to constructions of English as encompassing “rich” traditions of language, literature and ideas. Teachers valorise literary Englishes, evident in their positive endorsement of the “powerful”, “overarching master tales” of the human condition teachers imbue with particular significance. Many perceive the ability to question, to problem solve and to creatively shape society as a foundation of a literary approach to V.C.E. English subject. Consistent with Patterson’s (2000c) claims, these teachers cast their identities as language specialists who are committed to fostering independent, literate individuals ready to become global citizens.

Concerns that the world is moving “faster and faster”, “shrinking” and moving toward a “virtual community” underpin teachers’ perceptions that English has an ethical responsibility to prepare young people to actively shape the future. Teachers suggest this forward driven perspective is one that has been integral to English subjects in the past and is especially called for as autonomy is threatened by the development of a national curriculum. The study of language, literature and other texts is represented as part of this democratic enterprise. Through studying expression, persuasion and rhetoric in literary, and other texts, students are viewed as encountering a genealogy of ideas that have shaped human endeavours (Green et al., 2000). Students are portrayed as the cartographers who will “map”, “chart” and “navigate” the salient world of ideas embodied in literature as the “time capsule”, “repository of ideas”, or “testaments” of human ingenuity. Teachers’ reflections are embedded in discourses about identity: what it means to be Australian, and what it means to be a citizen of a global community and economy. Becoming conversant in issues of culture, politics, religion, science, innovation and society were identified as some of the integral understandings students take with them from their education. Some teachers suggested this social awareness and commitment to
ethical living in the global village, is part of the ‘hidden’ curriculum in V.C.E. English. English is defined by these teachers as a subject committed to the development of humane culture, building on past agendas, like those Dixon (2012) attributes to post Dartmouth foundations, that have shaped its ethical, critical and broader textual borders. Through reading texts, students engage in reading the world, preparing to live within, and challenge its borders. Indeed, one of the prominent themes in teachers’ accounts of what distinguishes V.C.E. English in the 21st century from its predecessors is the idea of students becoming not only critical and creative thinkers, but importantly designers of meaning.

10.1.1 Constructions of Literature

A future devoid of a literature is ideologically depicted as a world intellectually impoverished and deprived of passion and pleasure evoked through literature as art and aesthetic. Across the two years of senior English, and where possible in middle school, teaching students to read and reflect on literary texts is considered important to the teachers I interviewed. A significant theme in their responses is an evangelical view of literature as espousing eloquence and high ideals, which transforms readers’ lives. This transformative appeal is particularly evident in recurring metaphors of literary “elevation”, “transformation”, and “transcendence”. Critically developing students’ awareness and appreciation of what constitutes literature is seen as integral to them becoming discerning readers in their adult lives. Entering into adulthood is a rite of passage meta-narrative that resonates across the teachers’ reflections; associated with attaining knowledge and pleasure derived from the aesthetic. There are powerful ways of ‘knowing’ the world and being in relation to others, that is somehow mystically imbued in readers’ engagement with literature as opposed to other texts. Literature is depicted as an intense experience, evoking a yearning for beauty and hope as the antidote to a world otherwise described as “grim” and in a state of “despair”.

In defining literature, teachers employ beautiful images of art and loveliness, which other texts by their ordinary nature do not represent. An appreciation of the aesthetic as an artistic expression, which is simultaneously art and commentary, is evident in teachers’ appraisal of its merits. Imagery of literature as “painting with words”, and “art”, are embedded in enlightenment and romantic discourses in which it exists as a “mirror” of society, encapsulating the beautiful and tragic nature of the human condition. In some instances literature is defined by the readers’ intuitive sense of enlightenment; a realisation they are undergoing an experience that is meaningful. For others there is a recognisable intentionality in how writers aesthetically and conceptually grapple with ideas, which determines literary merit. Interestingly, some teachers more readily describe what literature is, by describing what it is not: popular culture, mass-produced media, “chick lit” or “airport reading”. Whilst popular culture texts, films and lesser fiction are depicted as relevant and modern, connecting with the
reader’s personal sense of identity and experience, literature is seen as transcending ordinary concerns, particularly evident in teacher’s depiction of the canon.

10.1.2 Canon

Teachers’ perceptions of the Canon are embedded in discourses associated with passion, pleasure and aesthetic appreciation. The expressive imagery describing literature as “esoteric”, “beautiful”, “intense”, and “alluring” conveys the sentiment underpinning teachers’ constructions of its appeal. Literary appreciation is portrayed as a civilising ideal, through which the individual reader is propelled from the ordinariness of their lives to imagine other possibilities. This transformative power of literature, reinforced in academic literature, is particularly evident in teachers’ advocacy of the canon, as majestically containing the history of ideas, language and metaphors that inform our human understanding (Dewey, 1934; Holbrook, 2013; Sumara, 2002). Although the composition of the canon is often disputed, many of these teachers view it as encompassing specific writers and their tales, portraying the reading of these as a rite of passage from youth to adulthood. Shakespeare is foremost among these canonical writers, with references to ‘Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘Macbeth’ often arising in teachers’ reflections. Other writers mentioned in reverential terms as the “literati” and “Masters” included Charles Dickens, Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte. These writer’s works are singled out as representing the epitome of refined and complex ideas, language and aesthetics, which poignantly evoke feelings of joy, sorrow, grief and unrest in readers. Experiencing the intense feeling of emotion that literature evokes, intellectually, emotionally and academically, enriches students’ understanding, “lifting that film of familiarity, [and] and awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom” (Reid, 2013, p. 11).

Depictions of the canon are also present in moral and humanist discourses. Classical texts are described as grave and often dark by nature, evident in teachers repeated references to “grim” texts. This gravity of subject matter, exposing the frailties of humanity, is portrayed as a necessary precursor to moral action. Literary reading is depicted as a possible catalyst for social change, enabling readers to explore the ethical dimensions of conflict, war, science, religion and society that define humanity. The idea that students read the world through literature is a prominent theme in teachers’ reflections. Reading is constructed as an ideological and socially interpretive act, through which individuals can examine current ethical debates by looking at the moral challenges depicted in past literature. The teachers regard canonical literature as informing and shaping human consciousness of humanity’s greater moral, political and social dilemmas. Far from seeing it as a ‘grey monolith’ (Holbrook, 2013), teachers describe literature as having a unique and special nature – challenging, morally uplifting and inspiring individuals to imagine better lives.
Finally, teachers’ depictions of the canon also show traces of discourses related to personal and national identity. The coming of age narratives, the Victorian romances and beauty of Regency novels are portrayed in terms of a perceived loveliness and beauty, in contrast to other literature, which is often dark and grim. Becoming immersed in the eloquence of these ‘light’ narratives is connected to images of self-growth, spiritual development and hopefulness, which many of these teachers’ hope to inspire. Providing opportunities for self-growth and realisation is positively viewed as helping a young person navigate their place in the world. Some teachers suggest, however, that developing students’ understanding of Australian culture is equally important in a rapidly evolving global climate. Ensuring the Australian canon is represented in V.C.E. English, and earlier years, is depicted as integral to helping students negotiate and imaginatively engage with their experiences and identities as Australians (Mclean Davies, 2008). However, there are threads of tension and discord in teachers’ reflections, with several expressing concern about issues of representation, particularly in relation to indigenous identity. Creating canons for the 21st century, which encompass new Australian and Indigenous voices, is valued as part of a cultural endeavour to reinvigorate the teaching of literature in V.C.E. English. Teachers’ concerns, embedded in political discourses, resonate around themes of social justice related to the Stolen Generation, immigration and multiculturalism. There are particular voices, however, which are seen as seminal to the Australian canon, representing values of hope, hard work and imagining. These include the bush poets and authors like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, and Aboriginal authors, including Sally Morgan. V.C.E. English, by including new literary voices alongside seminal favourites, has a role in preserving and recreating Australian culture and identity in ways suited to a modern nation, ensconced in a global community.

10.1.3 Passion and Pleasure

Teachers’ constructions of literary English are characterised by romantic discourses associated with pleasure and passion. A poignant idealism underpins their perception of literature as evoking intense feelings of pleasure, intuition and feeling that resonate throughout their adult lives (Sumara, 2002). There is an evocative undertone in teachers’ narratives, evident in their lyrical depictions of literature’s “richness” and “sheer beauty”. Lexemes associated with passionate love and romantic idealism further consolidate the idealistic ways in which literature is seen. Inspiring students’ “love affair” and “imagination” is in part, about reclaiming childhood curiosity and passion for words and images. In another sense, it is about developing a mature understanding of the ideals and discordant themes humanity grapples with, and allowing the literature to work upon the reader in transformative ways. There is an assumption underpinning teachers’ reflections that literature is “lovely” and “world opening”; that genuine pleasure in reading somehow elevates feelings of the heart and soul. Their views recall
eighteenth century Englishes concerned with the transformation of souls (Brass, 2011) and the Enlightenment agenda some see as reclaiming contemporary space (Medway, 2010). This is particularly reinforced in the teachers’ interviews through images of ascension and transcendence, conveying the significance teachers attach to the aesthetic and its transformative appeal. Even amidst the pressures of the final year of schooling, these teachers emphasise the humanising appeal of English in inspiring hopeful and imaginative thinkers who will discover and experience pleasure in the world.

Literature is depicted in terms of its significance as a record of the human condition, encompassing perspectives authors have felt compelled to immortalise. Framed within Romantic discourses, the individual’s passionate encounter with literary ideas is depicted as a spiritual experience that connects them to a deeper experience of self-fulfilment, and social meaning (Leavis & Thompson, 1964). Both Arnold’s civilising view of literature and Leavis’ idealism are particularly evident in their strong endorsement of the canon as an archive of human ingenuity and aesthetic appeal. Powerful metaphors used to characterise canonical works – “the big guns”, “the crème de la crème” and “the Masters” – evoke a vision of a glorious past, reinforced through references to an age of enlightenment. Pleasure is associated with a mythologised past when students studied the canonical masters, and recited poetry for art’s sake. Creative skills of composition and memorised recitation are portrayed as lost arts, sacrificed to critical agendas in English, which have subverted literary passion. Preservation or revival of these skills is an issue some teachers value as part of reinvigorating or reimaging English in the 21st century.

10.1.4 Criticism and aesthetics

For some teachers, the new V.C.E. English represents a demise in literary appreciation, whilst others see it as embodying a critical formation of the subject that reinvigorates literature and the aesthetic. More generally teachers valorise conceptual approaches to literary study, in which passion and critique might happily abide, leading to a richer appreciation of the aesthetic. Literary study is depicted in metaphors related to discovery and journeys: as “literary investigators” and “sojourners”, students search for figurative meaning in texts. These evangelical narratives focus on language as a tool or instrument of human thought and action. In order for students to infer and produce new meaning, there is an inherent need for students to understand how ideas are represented, challenged and socially mediated through language. Some teachers portray working adaptively with critical and creative approaches to the aesthetic as a resolution, which opens English into new realms of human possibility (Misson & Morgan, 2006).
Teachers portray a balance between creative and critical agendas in V.C.E. English as an ideal, which scaffolds students’ analytical skills, without sacrificing their sense of joy. Developing students’ intellectual curiosity, and aesthetic sensibilities is depicted as an inevitable outcome of literary inquiry that places critical literacy at its centre. Similar to the wonder of discovery, evident in young children as they learn to predict words and plots, critical approaches to texts are seen as fostering creative and conceptual thinking. Some literary genres are favoured over others, with canonical masterpieces and poetic works among these. Understanding the art of composition, and being able to make connections between the author’s intentions and the reader’s experience, is a significant theme in teachers’ accounts. Framed within democratic discourses, students’ capacities to address future concerns: sustainability, ethics, commerce and industry, are reliant upon their understanding of the signs, and symbols valued by different societies. Critique, therefore, enables the reader to move beyond emotively revelling in the text’s aesthetic beauty to questioning how meaning is made possible. Students are portrayed as intuitively participating in a form of sociality through literary study, whereby they come to know the language, structures and metaphors through which human experience is articulated.

Whilst critical approaches to literary reading are valued, there is tension around overtly working with formalised theoretical lenses such as Marxism and Feminist theory. Critical literacy is seen as part of a relational and analytical inquiry, quite distinct from the literary theories, many regard as too academic or removed from classroom practice. Some of the teachers expressed feelings of fear and reserve about this area, arising from their unfamiliarity with literary theory. While a few teachers identified themselves as traditionalists, defining their identity through their connection to literature, others who were not teaching V.C.E. Literature, or in Librarian roles, characterised themselves as non-literary readers. Furthermore, some teachers’ tertiary majors were in disciplines other than literary studies, which made it more difficult for them to adapt theories into practice. Others saw the value in utilising theoretical frames arguing these needed, however, to be adapted in meaningful ways. The teachers who argued in favour of utilising or adapting literary theories juxtaposed these "active" and "critical" modes of reading to passive constructions. Their views suggest there are particular ways of knowing that are more valued than others, with critical and contextual understandings being described in more significant terms as “enriched” and “powerful”. Understanding how literature is read and open to alternative interpretations is a common theme in teachers’ reflections, particularly in relation to the literary canon. Critical analysis of canonical literature, informed by an understanding of literary theory, was depicted as liberating students from the text and/or author, and the teacher’s viewpoint. Furthermore, considering how contemporary readers might understand or view the text differently to their predecessors is valued as a particular emphasis of V.C.E. English, that has become more important in recent times. Working with literary theory is perceived as
relevant if, these teachers suggest, it genuinely leads to a deeper appraisal of the literature and how meaning is aesthetically created.

### 10.1.5 Ethics and humanity

Literary versions of V.C.E. English are constructed around egalitarian and humanist discourses, in which there is a distinct valuing of egalitarian ideals. The recurring motif of the “global village” in teachers’ accounts, underpins a view of globalization as demanding new ethical and relational understandings. Egalitarian values of inclusivity, particularly in relation to gender, culture and community, reinforce teachers’ reflections on the merits of literary study and the pursuit of a humane, global society. Metaphors of literature as a “bridge”, “springboard” and “platform” are particularly significant, emphasising teachers’ valuing of literary practice as a foundation for exploring universal ideas. The two areas of textual study: Reading and Responding (text response) and Creating and Presenting (Context and writing) are portrayed in dynamic ways as cultivating students’ understanding of the human condition. The language and literary practices associated with these are inevitably bound to moral and political practices, which teachers value as part of a civilised social ideal (Sawyer, 2006). Teachers particularly value working with canonical texts. Prestige is attached to reading canonical literature, which is perceived as enriching students’ understanding of humanity, including its tragedies, virtues and conflicts. However, the study of other texts and media is also endorsed as contributing to a harmonising ideal, in which students find “a way to be in the world together”.

Modernity and technology are seen as forces shaping V.C.E. English in exciting and unknown ways. Teachers frequently depict their role as the navigator, or compass, guiding students in their understanding of the world. However, it is the students who are depicted as the cartographers, charting their way through the ideas, structures and language of texts in search of meaning. Literature is depicted through evangelical, and maternal imagery in these accounts as “fostering”, “nurturing” and “inspiring” students as meaning-makers. An emphasis on creative innovation and human ingenuity is a prevalent theme in teachers’ reflections. Teachers portray their focus on examinable content as a mandatory responsibility. Their reflections on literary study, however, articulate an ideological commitment to humanity. V.C.E. English is represented as facilitating a global move toward tolerance; justice and equity by ensuring students become critically literate thinkers, and creators of meaning. By creating a microcosm of the global village in their English classrooms, supported in part though literary engagement, these teachers see English as enabling them to create a context in which their students will become ethical individuals, capable of shaping the future differently.
10.1.6 Thinking about the future

Teachers imagine a future where English will be a site of creative innovation and possibility shaped by competitive economies, changing international relations, and possibilities for how people operate in virtual spaces. Consistent with Howie’s findings with a different cohort (Howie, 2008a), teachers contemplate this future, engaging in a (re)evaluating of the past, while simultaneously reflecting on how stakeholders: students, teachers and governments will respond. Shifting global relations are perceived by some teachers as particularly prominent in reconfiguring V.C.E. English from a print-centric subject to one that is media centric, focusing less on literary texts and increasingly on language and communication. The creation of English subjects that democratically embrace 21st century learning, through social media and technology, is envisioned as an emerging reality. Whilst the teachers who self-identify as the “traditionalists” and “old vanguard” primarily associate with literary versions of V.C.E. English, many also valorise new technologies and the ways these might be employed in positive ways as “instruments”, and “tools of learning”. The opportunity to participate in dialogue with a wider, and real audience, is foreseen as a new possibility, which will empower students to become producers, not simply consumers, of meaning. Metaphors of power and change pervade teachers’ depictions of students who will possess the capacity to “counter” and “resist” ideas as well as “innovate” new solutions to global issues. While technological innovations are seen as fuelling this generational shift in English from print to media, some teachers passionately advocated that literature should, and hopefully will, remain in English in Australia. Metaphors of literature as “the pulse” and “heart” of English studies present a valuing of literary culture, which they envision will endure alongside new traditions of textual practice. However, rethinking approaches to assessment and inquiry is seen as integral to sustaining and reimagining a literary culture in V.C.E. English, and in the Australian Curriculum. An approach to English, founded upon aesthetic appreciation and critical practice, is envisioned as ensuring the future of literature (Goodwyn, 2010).

The future of English is depicted as both demanding and evolving, with new textual traditions and opportunities for composition. Print literature is juxtaposed to technological mediums: including e-books, online fan-fiction, anime and tweets. Reading is implicitly embedded in the composite actions of critical interpretation, negotiation and response. Online mediated forms, alongside the study of significant print texts, are viewed as critically engaging students in these inferential processes, encouraging the growth of human ingenuity. Graphic and multimodal texts are particularly praised for stimulating students’ critical imagination. Reading for meaning is a complex process; some teachers perceive deconstructing imagery, colour, movement and sound, as an aesthetic equivalent to deconstructing symbolic representations in literary texts. In order for English in Victoria to sustain its integrity and relevance to young people’s lives,
teachers argue in favour of balancing approaches: the critical and creative; literature and multimodal texts.

Some teachers regard reconfiguring assessment practices as another necessary challenge for policy makers to address if English truly embraces textual diversity. Assessing reading through analytical essay-based responses “has its place”, however, it is viewed as limited in creative potential. Nested within democratic discourses, assessment is viewed as needing to be authentic, providing genuine opportunities for students to imagine, create and respond in realistic ways. This is apparent in teachers’ juxtaposition of “traditional” analytical essay-based responses relying on reproduction, with authentic assessment, which emphasises independent production. Furthermore, essay writing is portrayed as teacher-directed and often formulaic, evident in instructional metaphors of “baking a cake”, and “following formulas” whereas creative compositions and shorter pieces are seen as potentially giving students more autonomy over meaning and form. These more “authentic”, “real-world” forms of shorter, reflective responses, however, are seen as jeopardised by “numbers-driven” attitudes toward assessment. The continual emphasis on essays is seen as part of an assessment regime where student performance is valued at the expense of genuine student learning and engagement.

Empowering students to be ethical citizens and consumers is depicted as a democratic aim of V.C.E. English, which will inspire them to innovatively respond, in more creative ways, to the looming rhetoric of a neoliberal age. Enhancing students’ awareness of how market mechanisms, including the media, persuade is seen as an important element of English, dependent on non-literary instruction. The motif of being the ‘savy consumer’ represents a commodity culture (Singh & Han, 2006), in which individuals’ decisions and demands as consumers can influence the global economy. The pervasive role of the media in students’ lives is portrayed as particularly troubling. The immediate accessibility of the global market, and the machinations of persuasive advertising, creates a demand for students to think independently outside of its pervasive influence. Studying communication in the media, and ensuring students can counter manipulation is depicted as a necessary undertaking. Explicitly analysing persuasive language in the media is perceived to complement the focus on how literary meaning is made in the Context and text response areas of V.C.E. English. Knowing how language imaginatively and persuasively communicates ideas contributes to students’ ethical understandings of the world. Furthermore, understanding how the media operates helps students become critical consumers; knowing how to think about and respond to ideologies empowers them to become ethical producers.

A resonating theme in teachers’ reflections is hope for the future of English in Australia. Critical, ethical, aesthetic and democratic approaches to reading though literature, text, and media are part of the “road map”, or “compass” on which hope for the future partially rests.
Scaffolding authentic and innovative opportunities for inquiry is envisioned as ultimately leading students to develop forms of sociality, which enable them to lead productive lives (Kress, 2006b).

10.2 IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

In a time when English is facing unprecedented change, and there is anxiety in Australia and abroad about the status of literature (Beavis, 2013; Goodwyn, 2012; McLean Davies et. al., 2013; Patterson, 2012) – its definitions, practices, relevance and presence – it is important to ensure the voices of the profession are heard. As earlier stated, literature matters to these teachers. They continue to value its presence in English, although the terms they use to define literature and conceive its role reveal subtle nuances in how they value and experience it quite differently. There is something special, however, about literature that the teachers share. For these teachers, reading literature is about reading the world beyond its pages. There is artfulness to literature, an aesthetic imbued in language that they see as necessary for students to encounter, know and respond to. In sentiments that echo Holbrook’s (2013) assertion that tradition is the impetus for innovation, these teachers value literature as an archive of human history important in cultivating a culture of human ingenuity. Furthermore, literature is associated with the qualities that define humanity; the capacity to feel deeply, explore ideas with intellectual curiosity and imagine the world anew. Their belief in nurturing an appreciation for language, the interplay of words and the search for meaning is as Holbrook (2013) claims an “essential part of human potential… to communicate ideas and feelings… to create new realities” (p. 81). V.C.E. English, regardless of how the subject is configured in policy, remains for these teachers a place for significant endeavours that open the world to their students and give them the opportunity to be the creators and designers of new meaning.

In a context in which deficit discourses of English teaching are prevalent in the media, where the drive towards ‘efficiency’ and performance in national and international testing regimes promote a limited and reductive version of English and English teaching, accompanied by an increasingly narrow and shrill assertion of what ‘Literature’ should be, research which presents the complex and nuanced understandings and professional practice of teachers such as these is sorely needed. Without research of this kind in English that allows for storytelling, and values the authenticity of teachers’ voices, much deeper understandings of literature and its importance to the profession might be overshadowed or lost to machinations of assessment regimes and technologies. The research allowed these teachers to assert their voices in complex ways, across intersecting lines of the spiritual, cultural, intellectual and philosophical dimensions they associate with literary reading. Collectively their description of English echoes Howie’s (2008b) democratic vision of English as space of infinite possibilities. Several teachers see themselves as teaching on the cusp of a future age already seemingly present in the radical development of
social media, and global political and social economies. Furthermore, many emphasized a progressive view of V.C.E. English as inextricably bound to a modern global, social and political nexus concerned with what Green (2008) describes as “fundamental issues of language and identity, culture and power” (p. 38). Their reflections highlight how the teaching of literature within V.C.E. English has been particularly subject to challenge and review as educators grappled with emerging discourses, past traditions and policy reformation. Collectively their viewpoints elucidate how integral it is to attend to the professional voices of teachers who interpret and construct curriculum. If literature is to remain integral to English education it is important to elicit the kinds of voices that allow this debate to proceed in ways that are intellectually rigorous.

Golden age rhetoric has its place, and ideals about social and cultural enlightenment pervade these teachers’ reflections too. However, their reflections are likewise progressive and forward looking, considering the transformative power of literature in a global age. They argue in favour of stories as a source of intellectual and empathetic imagining. Some also contend that definitions of literature and valued reading needs to be broadened to encompass new stories of other times, people and places to foster cultural tolerance and social reimagining. There is an underlying view that whilst the universal themes in literature are enduringly important, other stories matter too, “pulling us towards a slightly different position in the world, a different… experience and being” (Reid, 2013, p. 66); which is exactly what many see English as working towards.

English is a creative and intellectual space, important to schools and communities. This research elucidated how a small group of V.C.E. English teachers perceived and valued literature and its associated practices of reading and response in students’ final year of secondary school. Although the study is small, the themes and discourses that frame teachers’ perceptions reflect more broadly the ways English teaching is constructed around literary ideas and more worldly agendas. Their reflections suggest acts of reading, thinking, sharing and responding are important to classroom communities as a microcosm of the world. In these spaces there is the genuine possibility to work toward what McLean Davies et al. (2013) call a ‘literary sociability’ that is respectful of past traditions and open to embracing new opportunities.
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