

# School English, literature and the knowledge- base question

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## Abstract

This article takes up questions about knowledge and the school curriculum with respect to literary studies within subject English. Its intention is to focus on literary studies in English from the context of current waves of curriculum reform, rather than as part of the conversations primarily within the field of English, to raise questions about the knowledge agenda, and the knowledge-base agenda for teaching and teacher education. The selection of texts and form of study of literature within the English curriculum has long been an area of controversy. Without assuming a particular position on knowledge in this area, this article shows that important questions of what knowledge-base teachers are expected to bring to their work are elided both in current regulations and debates, and in research on 'good teaching' in this area. If 'literary studies' (as a discipline or university major) is itself an unstable and changing field, what kind of knowledge does a good English teacher bring to their work? This paper takes up these questions in the context of the Australian Curriculum and standards for teacher registration, but it also points to the way these issues about knowledge are of broader relevance for researchers and teacher education.

## Introduction and background

This article arises from a project being undertaken in the Australian context, which focuses on the literary component of the English curriculum and the knowledge assumptions and underpinnings that are part of that. More specifically, the project is interested in these issues as they raise questions about and for teacher education and in relation to early career English teachers' entry into the profession. 'Knowledge' is rarely a central 'default' issue in discussions of literary studies and in the teaching of secondary English. What is the knowledge base for teaching in this curriculum area?

What does 'knowledge' in this area look like for the purposes of what teachers do with their students? In this article our intention is not primarily to take up the ongoing debate within subject English itself about approaches to literary studies (e.g. Appleman 2015; Beavis 2010, 2013; Misson and Morgan 2006, 2007), but rather to consider this from the broader perspective of curriculum frameworks and teacher education. We want to show the ambiguities and inexplicitness with which 'literary studies' as a form of knowledge is taken up in policies and research in this area, and which form a particular context for the work of teacher education and for further research.

The Australian setting of our work frames the questions we discuss in this article in particular ways. Australia is a former settler colony with its own particular history of subject English (Green & Cormack, 2008; Green, Cormack, & Patterson, 2013). While English has always been a core subject in Australia, and is seen as one that is fundamental to an individual's personal, cultural and literate development (Green & Cormack, 2008; Patterson, 2011), the socio-political history of the country has resulted in continuing uncertainty about the substance and status of 'Australian' literature

(Doecke, McLean Davies, & Mead, 2011a; Gelder, 2013; McLean Davies, Martin, & Buzacott, 2017) and shifting imperatives for the teaching of literature more generally (Beavis, 2010; Dolin, Jones, & Dowsett, 2017; McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2018). This uncertainty reflects ongoing imperial allegiances evident in school English curriculum (McLean Davies, 2011), problematic relations and guilt in relation to the Indigenous population and culture (Healy, 2011), and a rapidly shifting demographic: over half the population have at least one parent born in another country.<sup>1</sup>

National specificities are relevant because at the framework level, curriculum reforms do tend to pay attention both to ‘What should they know?’ and ‘Who should they become?’ and this is evident in the range of national curriculum reforms that have characterised the early twenty-first century. (Yates & Grumet, 2011). In Australia the overarching framework for a new national curriculum gave specific attention to both kinds of questions. Its specification of ‘learning areas’ reflected forms of subject and disciplinary knowledge considered important for young people. Its additional specification of ‘cross-curriculum priorities’ (viz. that students should have more exposure to Indigenous knowledge, to Asia and to issues of sustainability across different subjects) (Reid and Price, 2018) reflected the curriculum question, ‘Who should they become?’

Teacher education in Australia is also marked by its own specificities, including a history of state differences in values and emphases, and in the way some key issues are taken up (Yates, Collins, & O’Connor, 2011). Nevertheless, we would argue, the issues that motivate our project, while inflected by these specificities of place and history, are ones that also have some more general character that make the questions of our inquiry internationally relevant, and we will return to this later in the article.

While not without contest and debate, the study of literature has been viewed, historically, as a key component of subject English in Anglophone countries (Goodwyn, 2012; Medway, 2010; Mellor & Patterson, 1994; Sawyer, 2013). This article aims to focus on this central component of the English curriculum and more specifically on the question of what is the knowledge-base for teaching it. We use the term ‘knowledge-base’ in this article because we are particularly here taking up the question of knowledge from the perspective of ‘the making of English teachers’. What background in disciplinary studies and/or in teacher education do teachers bring to the teaching in this subject and what should they bring? If ‘Literary Studies’ is itself an unstable and changing field, what kind of knowledge should a good English teacher bring to their work? The aim of this article then is to explore some specificities of ‘knowledge’ in Literary Studies – and specifically its ongoing contested nature – as these impact on broader cases being made about knowledge and curriculum. We aim to show too that frameworks and regulations relating to English teaching themselves are surprisingly unhelpful about what kind of knowledge and knowledge-base teachers are expected to bring to their work.

Contested understandings of literary studies have been explicit in university departments and journals of the literary studies field (as we discuss briefly below – see Frow, 2001; Mead, 2011), and in the professional and academic literature related to secondary English teaching the focus and intended purpose of literary studies in subject English has long been at issue and the subject of fierce disagreements (Doecke, 2002; Snyder, 2008). Disagreements include the kinds of emphasis to be given to discipline knowledge compared with student meaning-making and engagement (Dixon, 2012; Reid, 2017), or to cultural heritage compared with contemporary social themes (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014), or to a national compared with a global focus – and many more. In the past decade, these questions about the purpose and character of

literary studies in English have been reinvigorated both in Australia and internationally. Global movements, population shifts, economic and cultural fears have spawned a host of new national curriculum frameworks and curriculum reforms (Yates & Grumet, 2011). In these reforms English (and its equivalent in other countries) along with History has borne much of the weight of 'national' decisions about what is to be conveyed to students about their culture (Green, 1999; Paterson, 2008) and their national identity.

At the same time, in the broader curriculum literature (including in special issues of this journal), there has been a revived debate about the knowledge question, both about the characteristics of knowledge that matter in relation to school curriculum, and about the extent to which this, rather than other social objectives, should drive curriculum frameworks. Here there has been a stream of discussion about 'bringing knowledge back in', and 'powerful knowledge' (Young, Lambert, Roberts, & Roberts, 2014) as well as continued and new attention to social justice and diversity (Reid & Price, 2018; Zipin, Fataar, & Brennan, 2015). Many accounts, whether conservative or critical, imply that 'knowledge', in the case of English, will include (or even is primarily about) substantive cultural knowledge or values (Green & Cormack, 2008; McLean Davies, 2011). Together these developments draw renewed attention to questions about what kind of knowledge or purpose is intended to be represented in the different subjects that make up the curriculum – questions both of substance and form, and questions that are both about what is (current practices) and what should be (what 'high quality' or 'good' practice looks like).

Our own context and the focus of our study is Australia, but we believe the types of issues we raise here have resonance not just in other countries where English is studied as L1 (Chapman, 2012; Goodwyn, 2012; Yandell & Brady, 2016) but also in countries where other languages and national histories and cultures are the vehicle for cognate issues (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010). That is not to say that the curriculum contexts and cultural histories of teaching any L1 in relation to literature are similar across different national settings. In some settings there are stronger or more consistent traditions around 'the literary' than in Australia (albeit now generally also being disrupted by population diversity and new claims), and some have more explicit and regulated frameworks and assessment criteria that can override some of the issues we draw attention to here (Trohler, 2016; Yates, 2016). For example, while the USA has traditionally held a stronger sense of its own literary canon than Australia, contention around what might be included or excluded in the canon continues in contemporary contexts in which there is a particular emphasis on the representation of multi-ethnic and multi-racial texts (Miller, 2017; Ruoff and Ward, 1990). Additionally, the much discussed Dartmouth conference of 1966 generated some clear differences in views about what knowledge in this area looks like between participants from the UK and from the USA (Muller, 1967; Sawyer, 2018).

### Shifting frames for knowledge in subject English: the Australian curriculum framework

The Australian national curriculum has been in operation, to various extents, for less than a decade. While attempts to mobilise a national curriculum have been a feature of Australia's curriculum history (Brennan, 2011; Yates et al., 2011), it was not until 2008 that the first draft of what was then called the National Curriculum (now the *Australian Curriculum*), was released with bi-partisan support. Prior to this, States and Territories,

who have the responsibility under a federated system for the provision of education, each developed their own local curriculum; if synergies between States and Territories existed, this was largely the result of various contingencies, rather than design.

English, Mathematics, Science, and History were the first four school subjects to be developed for national implementation. While there were often public debates about what content should be included in each of these subjects, the most contentious were in English and History. With regard to subject English, discussion centred around the overall framework of curriculum design chosen for English, namely, the organisation of the content into three Strands – Language, Literature, and Literacy (Doecke, McLean Davies, & Sawyer, 2018). While this may on the surface appear uncontroversial, this organisation moved away from at least a decade of curriculum design in Australia which had emphasised the language modes—speaking and listening, reading and viewing, writing, and producing—as the key organisational principles of subject English; and ‘texts’ rather than ‘literature’, as a focus of the work of students and teachers of English. The ‘return’ to literature, as both a category and a focus, thus signalled a shift in subject English.

This revised organisation of school English in the *Australian Curriculum: English* can be understood as an attempt to identify the core knowledges required for students undertaking this subject. The early consultation documents which outlined the basis of the English curriculum argued that English had a ‘core knowledge base’ defined as ‘knowledge about the English language, knowledge about literature, and knowledge about how to use English actively and effectively across a broad range of settings’ (NCB, 2008b, p. 7; see also NCB 2008a, NCB, 2009). This seemed to signal the importance of the development of disciplinary knowledge as a key intention of the curriculum, and a view of knowledge underpinning practical application. However, in the Curriculum itself when the term ‘knowledge’ is used it is largely knowledge about language that is referenced (grammar, discursive conventions), whereas literary ‘knowledge’ (the knowledge that is embodied in literary studies as a discipline and scholarly practice) is elided (McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018).

As we argue in more detail elsewhere (McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018; Doecke et al., 2018) the *Australia Curriculum: English* framework seems to map the three terms ‘knowledge, understanding and skills’ separately to the three strands of the curriculum: with language as ‘knowledge’; literary studies as ‘understanding’; and literacy as ‘skills’. Language or linguistic knowledge as it is presented is most clearly propositional knowledge, and more readily associated with arguments set up elsewhere for ‘scientific’ knowledge or ‘powerful’ knowledge. Literary ‘understanding’ is presented as something students achieve about the world beyond the text. For example, the framework suggests that engaging with the literature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will support students’ understanding of the contributions made by these peoples to Australian history and culture. But the issue of what is involved in this specifically literary study is elided (are the texts here things that somehow speak for themselves?). A later review of the original curriculum framework (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014) took issue with this component, and sought to emphasise the importance of a knowledge of British literature and its impact on Australian writing (Spurr, 2014). But here too the issue of the form of literary studies in the curriculum in relation to forms of knowledge or ‘knowledge as understanding’ is again left largely tacit.

The tenuous nature of this framework for English is evident in the ways in which it has been implemented. Although the Australian Curriculum, received bi-partisan Federal (i.e. national) government support and was also supported in principle by the State and

Territory Governments, the implementation of the curriculum has revealed that local differences, allowed by legislation, have continued to determine the ways that that students experience subject English across the nation. For example, in the State of Victoria, although much of the *Australian Curriculum: English* has been retained, the language modes have been reinstated as the principle organising feature, thus shifting the *Australian Curriculum: English's* focus on Language, Literature and Literacy. Disparity between the national and State curricula is further exacerbated by the fact that while the *Australian Curriculum: English* is constantly evolving— it began with version 1.0 in 2010 and the latest version, 8.3, was released in 2016 – States and Territories have each engaged with the *Australian Curriculum: English* at a certain point in time to inform curriculum that will be fixed for a specific term, and in some cases printed in hard copy and distributed to schools (as well as being available via the internet).

Moreover, while there is some level of articulation between the *Australian Curriculum: English* and the State and Territory Curricula in the compulsory years of schooling (ages 5–16, school Years Foundation to 10), jurisdictions have shown considerable reluctance to change their curriculum in the Senior Years of schooling (ages 17 and 18, school Years 11 and 12). While a Senior Years National Curriculum exists in the form of a suite of English subjects, comprising Standard English, a second subject focussing on literature, and a third more vocationally oriented offering, this organisational division of subjects has not been adopted across the nation, and specific secondary qualifications, such as the Higher School Certificate (HSC), available to students in New South Wales, and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) remain distinct from national curriculum directions.

So, in terms of questions about knowledge and the knowledge-base of teaching literary studies in Australia, the policy context has been shifting yet remains unresolved and is often tacit. On the one hand there has been a move to reinstate 'literature' rather than 'texts' as a named feature of English, and to distinguish this from 'literacy' and 'language', rather than having the latter as the key organising device. Yet the substantive discussion of 'literature' in the framework positions literature as a means through which students might more broadly understand themselves and their local, national and global contexts. This notion of engagement with literature as a mechanism through which self or cultural knowledge might be achieved, rather than literary knowledge as a knowledge category in and of itself is conveyed through the association of literature with words such as 'appreciate' in the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2016). Further, lack of agreement around the purposes and value of literature and the specificity of literary knowledge is evident also in the differing organisations of the school English curriculum in State and Territory documents for both the compulsory and senior secondary years of schooling. This brief account shows, then, that the articulation of literary knowledge in the *Australian Curriculum: English* framework is both controversial (there are different views of what matters in Literary Studies) and opaque (the framework/policy does not resolve differences and variation continues).

### *'Bringing knowledge back in'? Literary studies as discipline and as school subject*

The original versions of the case made by Young, Muller and others about 'powerful knowledge' saw such knowledge as having been developed outside schools, largely in the form of systematic disciplines operating over time, and as an essential underpinning for curriculum structure in schools (Young & Muller, 2013). Later, there was a stronger acknowledgement that school curriculum thinking (not just pedagogical

thinking) involves more than simply deriving a curriculum from a tertiary discipline (Young et al., 2014) since curriculum is necessarily 'recontextualised' in schools. But the thinking about the relationship between what schools should do and the systematic knowledge work outside schools, particularly in the form of 'academic disciplines', remains an important part of the arguments about what is conceptually powerful and structurally important in the organisation of school subjects. (Young et al., 2014). Similar thinking underpins the concept of 'pedagogical content knowledge' which we discuss later in this article. This work has been subject to some criticism (Newell, Tallman, & Letcher, 2009; Yandell, 2017). Yates and Miller (2016) showed that even in the case of Physics it is not an easy matter to be clear about what is 'the discipline' for the purposes of schooling. And a number of writers have argued and shown that the original discussion about knowledge presumed a science-like disciplinary field whose knowledge structure is more hierarchical than the forms characterizing humanities (Barrett, Hoadley, & Morgan, 2018; Yates, Woelert, Millar, & O'Connor, 2017). Muller and Bernstein have described some of these differences in knowledge structure as humanities having 'horizontal' rather than 'vertical' knowledge forms (Bernstein, 1996; Muller, 2000). Thomas Kuhn, the influential historian of science, differentiated the social knowledge fields from the physical sciences in part by their form of not working with 'paradigm consensus', but rather with contested paradigms and new questions that were themselves derived from the changing social world and from differences of political values (Kuhn, 2012).

There is a substantial and long-standing discussion on the way in which the purposes and forms of knowledge in the humanities are different from those of the physical sciences (Kagan, 2009). In the case of literary studies in subject English, both problems for the 'knowledge' case alluded to above are particularly evident: the issue of the purposes of the school subject English have never been simply tightly tied to an associated university subject or disciplinary field in a way that parallels school science (Green & Reid, 2012), and the disciplinary field itself is highly contested and shifting as to its form and objects of study (Carter, 2009; Frow, 2013; Mead, 2011; Longley & Bode, 2014).

In the case of English, it is well accepted that the school subject and the disciplinary field have at least some distinct origins, purposes and differences of scope, and possibly major ones (Doecke et al., 2011a; Green & Cormack, 2008). But for schools (and for the purposes of teacher education) there nevertheless remains an unavoidable question about what the knowledge-base of English is, and in particular, about the form of literary studies. In saying this, we are making an empirical or pragmatic point, not assuming a particular definition of 'knowledge-base', either literary or educational, or assuming it can be defined in content or in form. In practice, being employed or professionally recognised as a teacher of literature assumes certain background and abilities in that area, and we are drawing attention to questions about how coherent the expectations are about this.

In Australia, the national regulatory body, The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) requires three years' undergraduate study (and a teaching qualification) as the necessary disciplinary basis for teaching English (AITSL, 2011; NES, 2014). However, beyond this reference to length of undergraduate studies, the specificity of what one needs to enter an initial teacher education program to teach English and what is needed to be achieved in that teacher education program (at least in relation to literary studies) is open to interpretation. The specialist guidelines for pre-service English teachers in the State of Victoria, for example, require:

- a. Major or minor study in English (Literature or Literary Studies) or (b) Major or

minor study in Writing, English Language Studies or Linguistics together with a Part in English (Literature or Literary Studies) (VIT, 2015).

However, what constitutes a major or minor in literary studies, for example, is not consistent across universities within one State or Territory, let alone across the nation (Mead, 2011). Similar openness is seen in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, developed in 2011. It is noteworthy that the Australian standards are generic, not subject specific, though there had been earlier debate about the need for subject-specific standards (Ingvarson, 2002). Under the domain 'Know the content and how to teach it', teachers are required to be able to demonstrate 'knowledge and understanding of the concepts, substance and structure of the content and teaching strategies of the teaching area' (AITSL, 2011), but any specificity with regard to disciplinary knowledge is left to individuals and the jurisdictions and institutions of which they are a part.

Yet, in the case of English, the question of what constitutes 'the teaching area' is precisely the point at issue. If we look to universities, the question of what constitutes the 'disciplinary field' is extremely ambiguous or fraught (Frow, 2013; Guillory, 1993; Lynch, 2014). In Australian universities it may no longer be named 'English,' and in some cases, is not a recognisable department or disciplinary community as such. However, the expansion, splitting and reconfiguring of the field at the tertiary level means that what students bring from their undergraduate experiences to their teacher education and entry to teaching is a pertinent question in relation to knowledge and the curriculum. It is also pertinent to the important question of what the role of graduate teacher education might be in bridging or developing the knowledge-base for English teaching. In practice, students who come to professional preparation as English teachers might come with close and detailed knowledge of classic English texts of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries; or they might come having been formed in media studies or 'communication' degrees; or they might have come via studies that focused on feminist or postcolonial perspectives in cultural studies; or they might even have studied Australian literature of various types.

And there is a further issue in the case of the school subject English. As we have noted above, the subject has three components: language, literature and literacy (ACARA, 2016). As we indicated, this is a relatively new organisation of the field and it raises a question about what is the assumed relationship between the three strands, as well as what 'qualifies' teachers to be able to teach the subject. 'Literacy' in particular has no cognate university 'discipline' as such and yet it occupies the bulk of the specific attention and regulation of English teaching and teachers, not least because of its regular measurement in the national testing program NAPLAN (Comber, 2012). Part of the research project we have in train and will describe later is a national survey to gain a more systematic sense of just what English teachers in Australia actually bring to their work with literature from their tertiary studies, and what patterns and silences this might set up.

The discussion above raises the issues of 'knowledge-base' in terms of practical difficulties and the (lack of) clarity and coherence in the policies and frameworks. Similar issues also arise conceptually if we take as our starting point the curriculum literature and arguments about knowledge and curriculum. For example, the social realist arguments which have been the background for the 'powerful knowledge' case (Moore & Muller, 1999; Moore, 2013; Young, 2008; Young 2013; Young & Muller 2013) seem manifestly inadequate in terms of explaining what is distinctive, important or powerful about literature or literary studies, given their over-emphasis on propositional knowledge and truths, and attempts to draw a sharp division between 'powerful' knowledge and everyday experience (Doecke & Mead, 2017; Yandell, 2017; Yates &

Miller, 2016). But the knowledge arguments to some extent have struck a chord because they draw attention to something that is a relevant kind of question for schooling: what kind of (intellectual) development and learning is intended for students in the time they spend in this compulsory institution? For example, what is intended to cumulate or build over time in relation to studies of literature? In the articles that led up to the *Australian Curriculum: English* there was a repeated insistence on a systematic program of study and development over time in the area of Literature (though it is difficult to see how this plays out in the final Curriculum):

The national English curriculum will have a systematic program of study in literature, both written in and translated into English. It will engage students with an increasingly systematic understanding of the creative processes of composition, the practices of aesthetic craftwork that have been perennially valued, of how those processes have come about and of why societies have recognised their value (NCB, 2009, p. 16; see also NCB, 2008a, p. 11, 19; NCB, 2008b, p. 11).

Neither narrative case-studies of good practice nor simply having a prescribed form of assessment directly engages these questions.

So, in Australia, a number of different issues are evident in relation to questions concerning knowledge and literature in the curriculum: (1) that English teachers more than other fields seem to come with differing and potentially non-overlapping undergraduate foundations; (2) that the issue of what constitutes 'the discipline' of literary studies is in question; (3) that the school subject English, as it is articulated on the national level, comprises three different strands and that specification of 'three years of undergraduate study' elides the differential adequacy of such study in relation to different strands of the curriculum; and (4) that this whole discussion begs the issue of what the 'knowledge' or knowledge underpinnings that are appropriate to the school subject English might be. In some subjects (e.g. Physics) it would be expected that teachers come with good substantive knowledge of the content or topics they will be teaching, as well as experience and disciplinary identity-formation of what it means to approach a problem as a scientist; in History they would not necessarily be expected to come with all the substantive topic knowledge they would be teaching, but would be expected to have developed the experience and disciplinary identity-formation of doing History as an undergraduate (Yates et al., 2017). For English teachers, even the latter seems to be in question.

By starting with these issues about the 'discipline' and the hard-to-pin-down nature of what is being assumed about the knowledge base of secondary teachers in this area, we are not assuming that the school subject should be coterminous with the discipline or that 'knowledge' in literary studies in the school subject must be fundamentally derived from the field, organised as a disciplinary community (university departments, conferences and the like) (Doecke & Mead, 2017; Mead et al., in press). Rather we are trying to show that the relationship and purposes here bear further investigation, and that they have particular import for what might be expected of pre-service teacher education in preparing teachers in this area, and for in-service professional learning.

### Text selection as a proxy for a 'knowledge' case

Possibly the most common way implicit understandings of the role of literary knowledge take place in public and professional contexts is in arguments about text selection. Debates about text selection and censorship can be understood as both tacitly, and at times explicitly, concerned with might constitute powerful knowledge within this subject area (Doecke & McLean Davies, 2017). The problem is that the

swapping of preferences about texts does not clarify different perspectives on the kind of knowledge or knowing that literary studies in English is intended to develop (Grossman, 1991; McLean Davies, 2014). For example, such debates often take the form of arguing for classics or a canon versus arguing for attention to inclusion of diversity and modern textual forms (Martin & McLean Davies, 2016). But this elides a number of potentially different rationales for what 'literary knowledge' in curriculum represents. Is it primarily about transmitting (being a window to) particular values about the culture or is it about literary studies as developing particular ways of knowing? What is it assumed that teachers are doing or developing with these texts – is it about meaning making, is it about technical (disciplinary) knowledge, is it about helping to develop students' 'literacy'? Do the qualities of the texts themselves matter – and if so, what is it that matters? How much are the debates about text selection simply expressions of personal preference or political values, or of a teacher's experience of what has 'worked' or not worked with a particular group of students; and how much are questions of knowledge subsumed by pragmatic considerations regarding what is available, materially, in store rooms and in libraries? (McLean Davies, 2014). The emotional strength with which the text selection debates are prosecuted indicates that participants see that something important is at issue regarding this part of the curriculum, but the focus on text selection tends to obscure or at best leave tacit what of pedagogical value should be done with the texts.

As they are played out in the media and through policy debate, arguments about text selection and censorship imply that the cultural knowledge accessed through the study of a text (McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018) is contained within the text itself, and is not developed or mediated through classroom study by the work of teachers and the knowledge base they bring to the task through their own disciplinary training or practical experience, or by the contributions and knowledges of students (Newell et al., 2009; Yandell, 2017). In this way, debates about text choices imply that the study of literature has significant fixed cultural and social implications and dangers for knowledge development that teachers or students are unable to influence or guide. To draw on the paradigm of knowledge offered by Green, this presentation tacitly assumes literary knowledge as relating to the text itself, rather than being located in the critic or reader (Green & Cormack, 2008; Green, 2018).

Thus, debates about literary knowledge which either tacitly or explicitly focus on the selection and censorship of texts, important though they may be, are not a sufficient form of addressing the knowledge question. They have the effect of directing attention away from the knowledge that is developed by working with and through literary texts in classrooms and tend to be silent about the knowledge teachers bring to bear in the study of texts. One recent departure from this paradigm can be seen in the revision of a text selection policy in the Australian State of Victoria (VCAA, 2017). Following furore about the setting of a text about Israeli/Palestinian relations and concerns about the inadequate representation of 'community standards' (Broom, 2016), this policy was updated to explicitly acknowledge the role of teachers in working with students and texts. This acknowledgement of teachers' contribution to the study of texts, however, remains largely absent from general conversations about text selection and thus results in understandings of literary knowledge as bound by, and unique to, each text set for study.

**The literary knowledge question and research on teachers and classrooms**

Much of the extensive scholarly literature on the teaching of Literature in English has focused on curricular and pedagogical questions about the form and content of the subject (e.g. Corcoran & Evans, 1987; Doecke, McLean Davies, & Mead, 2011b; Knights & Thurgar-Dawson, 2006; McCormick, 1994; Misson & Morgan, 2006; Peim, 1993; Reid, 1984; Scholes, 1985; Thomson, 1992; van de Ven & Doecke, 2011), and offers an alternative to the publicly dominant debates about text selection. In this work, a prominent strand of research on the teaching of literature argues for the importance of the classroom as a site of knowledge production (Dixon, 1975; Reid, 1984, 2017) and scholarly books often draw on and collate individual examples of practice, to affirm the work of teachers in classrooms and to highlight the ways in which the sociable work that takes place in subject English results in shared production of knowledge (Doecke et al., 2011a; Goodwyn, Reid, & Durrant, 2014; van de Ven & Doecke, 2011; Yandell, 2013).

Yet, while this classroom-focused work offers insights into the literary knowledge reflected in the complexity of classroom interactions, even this work does not explicitly take up the kinds of questions about knowledge and knowledge-base and the role of teacher education we have identified in the previous sections. In emphasising the interactions that happen in classrooms, and the importance of the 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) students bring to their explorations of texts, these accounts of practice legitimately argue for particular ways in which knowledge is built in classrooms, but do not explicitly attend to how the particular knowledge that *is* built is recognisably 'English' or 'literary studies'. In this sense, these studies, by focusing on the relational aspect of classroom practice as a means through which valuable or powerful knowledge can be both created and understood, serve to turn attention away from broader questions of subject or disciplinary knowledge as they might exist across contexts, times and places. Such classroom studies (e.g. Newell et al., 2009; Yandell, 2017) seek to illustrate examples of good practice, but leave largely implicit the background knowledge-base from which the teacher is able to draw students into these good practices.

### Literary studies in subject English: some agendas for further research

So, what is happening with the literary studies component of English in school classrooms, and what should be happening? What direction of development or cumulation is intended in this subject? What concept(s) of literary knowledge (or working with literature) do teachers bring to their work? Where do their views of the purposes and content of teaching literature come from – from their own school experience? from their university studies? from their teacher education in the area? from other engagements with texts, literature, communities and networks?

In the Australian context, the issues we have raised in this article point to a range of new questions for empirical research. First, given the ambiguities of the 'knowledge-base' evident in the regulations, as well as the case made in so much of the literature that the teachers' own understandings and intentions are so central to student learning, what do teachers across Australia actually bring to their thinking about the literature part of the curriculum? Here we are undertaking a large national survey to explore their actual studies and through surveys and interviews, we are probing their own understandings of this part of the curriculum, and the key influences on their thinking and approach. In particular, we are interested in what concept of the subject is being drawn from teachers' own experiences of that study when they were at school. And what do they draw on from their tertiary studies? We are interested in whether the diversity of

experiences teachers bring to their teaching matters, or does it point to something distinctive about the knowledge form in this area that is being missed in the debates about knowledge and curriculum?

Second, what is the role of teacher education in preparing or supporting new teachers? How do teachers themselves put together their thinking about students, engagement, culture, working with words, meaning-making and the like? And where does such meaning-making stand in relation to knowledge? Here we want to take seriously both the understandings that teachers have of the work of the classroom, and the kinds of questions being aired in the curriculum reforms and frameworks at national level to (re)consider what constitutes high quality in teaching in this area.

Third, we want to understand more about what it means to think about literary knowledge in the context of the school. What kinds of reconfiguration of thinking by the teacher can be seen as they move from being a tertiary student to a student teacher, to working in school contexts in the first years of their teaching career? We are not assuming this is necessarily a one-way set of changes where the changes are just about bowing to the power of examinations or responding (recontextualising) in the face of being confronted with the actual diversity of students and their interests. Rather we are aiming to consider what rethinking about, and new creation of, literary knowledge takes place in this context of schooling, and what active work and creation by the teachers is part of this. We are aiming to do this by a longitudinal qualitative interview-based study following early career teachers over three years.

We are interested here in an expanded understanding of the literary field, as a field in which schooling is an active participant. How do we understand the literary field when we look across the stages of schooling and professional preparation? Equally, what is and what should be the relationship between university studies and teacher education and the work of schools?

Fourth, we are interested in the ways that literature is put to use in different national contexts for the creation of citizens. What can we see about the relation (or tension between) the history and cultural and political context of curriculum, and the history and construction of literature in national settings? And how relevant are the issues we set out here for a country like the USA which resists national curriculum frameworks and has a history of a more explicit knowledge underpinning for literary studies? Or for a country like England which moved in the 1980s from localised curricula to a more centrally prescribed curricula and assessment regime?

In this article we have been focusing on the tacitness and ambiguities of the knowledge and knowledge-base of teaching literary studies, and in some respects, this has been a focus on what is absent or left implicit, and that is one starting point of the research project we have embarked on. In other parts of the project we will revisit the debates and literature about literary studies and English teaching that make specific cases

for a particular way of thinking about knowledge in literary studies. But our starting point is that the issue here is one that requires both kinds of work: the conceptual and the empirical. The knowledge questions require attention both to the normative conceptions and arguments that circulate so strongly in this subject area, and to empirical research on what teachers bring to the task and how this develops in the particular context of school (Mead et al., in press). The research project that we are engaged in (MGSE, 2016) is attempting to keep in view both what is taking place in the classroom or with teacher development over time and also questions about knowledge and quality.

The issues we have discussed in this article indicate a need to investigate ‘the knowledge question’ in subject English in ways that do not assume a static notion of knowledge as given and external to the dynamic activities of the classroom (as is promoted in the ‘powerful knowledge’ debates), nor, conversely, assume that literary knowledge can only be understood through the dynamic relationship occurring in the classroom. A particular interest is how the literary theoretical knowledge that teachers bring to their professional practice frames the interactions that occur within classroom settings. The challenge here is not to simply assume what is good practice as the starting point (or underpinning) of research accounts of classrooms, nor to focus only on rehearsing critical stories of sexism, racism, classism, centralised control and the negative effects of testing. Rather we need to find ways of looking at the world of the classroom and literary study in contemporary times that are open to the complexity with which knowledge is understood, mobilised and valued, and to acknowledging the forces and experiences outside the classroom that mediate these experiences.

## Note

1. Indeed, a recent political upheaval was generated by a literal re-reading of the Australian constitution that found that a significant number of members of parliament were ineligible to continue to sit because they retained some form of citizenship entitlements to other countries through their place of birth or parental place of birth (Remeikis, 2017).

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