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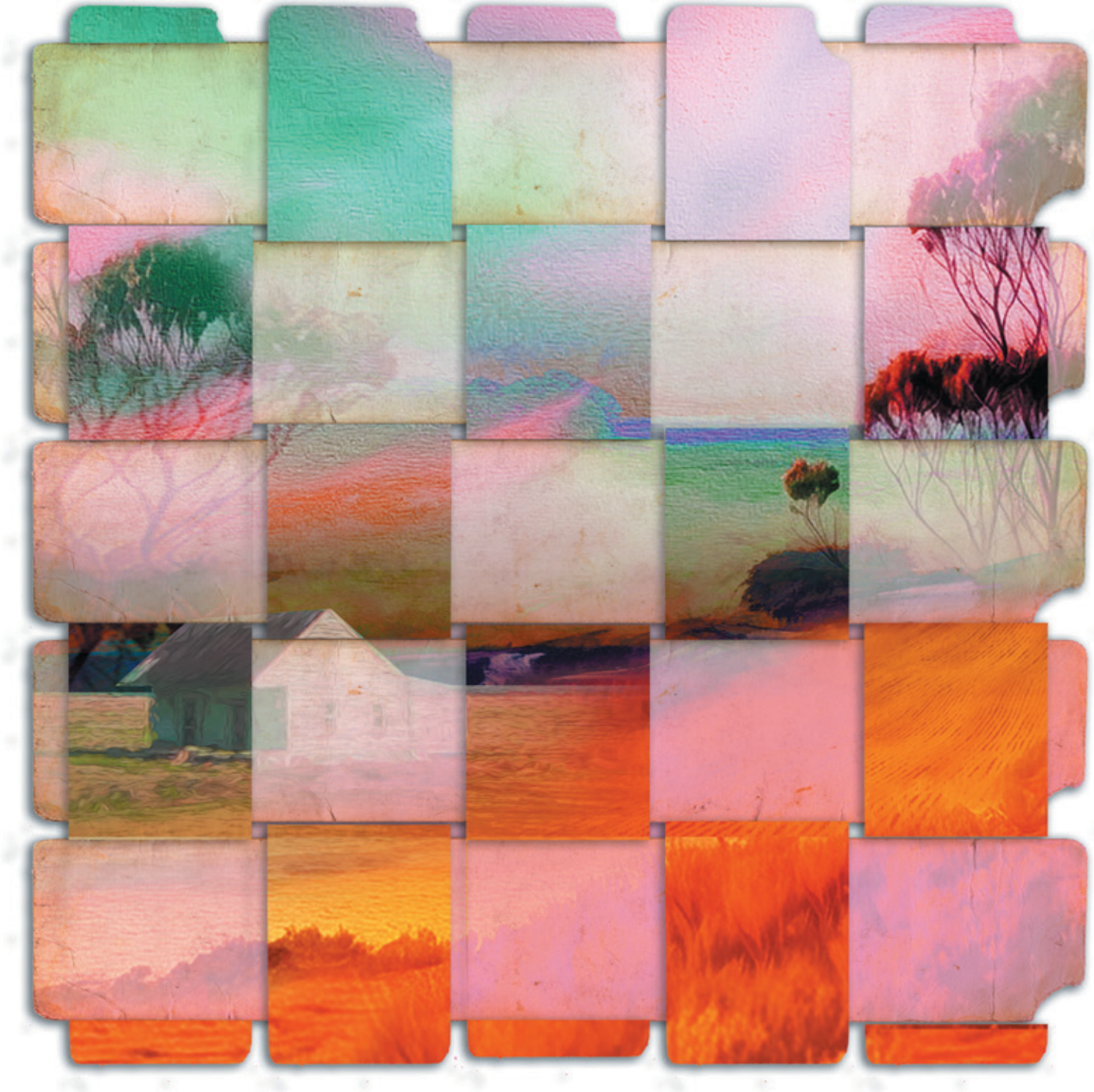

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Australian Journal of English Education

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Australian Journal of English Education 2024

Guidelines for Contributors

The *Australian Journal of English Education* is the peer-reviewed national journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE).

The journal is committed to publishing material that is of importance to English educators. We welcome high quality teacher-oriented and scholarly submissions in any relevant field of English education, including literature and literacy education.

We are interested in submissions that reflect dilemmas, debates and concerns facing current contemporary English educators in Australia and elsewhere. Submissions may take the form of:

- A report on empirical research conducted with or by English teachers or students in classrooms
- A theorised discussion of English curriculum, or of the effects of policy on English teaching, or
- Practitioner inquiries, including reflective writing that takes a scholarly and methodical approach, that elaborates or illuminates aspects of the practices of English teachers.

Submissions should be explicitly linked to issues of English teaching, pedagogy or curriculum and demonstrate familiarity with current and pertinent scholarly literature.

Articles will be considered from any context where the learning and teaching of English is framed in ways that would engage and interest a secondary English teacher. Writers should take care to relate, early in their submission, the research context for the benefit of both Australian and international readers. The journal welcomes contributions that challenge traditional ways of thinking about English and that prompt readers to entertain new ways of conceptualising English curriculum and pedagogy

Contributors are encouraged to read previous issues of *English in Australia* to get a sense of the existing and ongoing scholarly conversations in our journal. Articles that share Higher Degree Research conducted by English teachers (e.g. Ph.D. and Ed.D. research findings) are welcome.

All articles are subject to double blind peer review by at least two reviewers. This means that the identity of the author is not divulged to the reviewers, nor are the reviewers' names revealed to the author.

Please refer to the following guidelines:

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3. Ensure your name is removed from the article, including from the document properties.
4. All submissions should be typed with double spacing in an easy to read font (e.g. Times New Roman or Calibri, 11–12 point) with a 2.5 cm margin on all sides.
5. Your submission should begin with an abstract of 100–150 words that succinctly summarises the research: context; design or methodology; and findings.
6. All references should conform to the American Psychological Association (APA) style. Please consult the *APA Publication Manual*, 7th edition, or any guide to APA referencing available through university library websites.
7. Submissions are expected to have a high standard of written English. Please ensure that you have carefully edited and proofread your submission. Articles submitted with a poor standard of written English, style problems or inaccurate/missing references will be returned to the author for revision before being considered for blind review.
8. Where possible, avoid footnotes. Usually it is possible to incorporate them into the text. Where they cannot be avoided, they should be numbered with a superscript and listed at the end of the article (endnotes).
9. It is the responsibility of authors to seek copyright clearance for any materials quoted, as required.
10. It is the responsibility of authors to ensure that all required ethics approvals and relevant permissions have been received prior to the submission of an article for review. Please ensure that a statement about ethical issues appears in articles that include data collected from or about humans, including any pertinent information about approvals or permissions.
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Although *Australian Journal of English Education* is predominantly a curriculum research and practice journal, occasionally poems and short texts of other genres relevant to the themes and readership of the journal are also published. Such pieces should be relevant to the lives and work of English teachers and students and be accompanied by a short (300–800 word) abstract or reflection. Please email the Editor regarding submissions of this type.

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Editorial

TEACHING ENGLISH IN RURAL AUSTRALIA: AN EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Bill Green, Jennifer Dove and Patricia Dowsett

Introduction

What is different and distinctive, if anything, about English teaching in rural Australia? That is the primary question motivating this Special Issue. There seemed to us a marked silence in the professional literature, including *English in Australia*, in response to this question. We considered it a significant and telling absence, especially when we think about Australia's geography and the distribution of high schools across the nation, as well as within each state jurisdiction, and the fact that all of these feature English teaching as a central part of the school curriculum. Many English teachers begin their careers teaching in the country, in one way or another, and a significant proportion spend a good part of their working life in country schools. New appointments, particularly in the public sector, always include a number sent to country schools. For many years, indeed, this was an obligation written into the terms of employment and professional accreditation, although it has recently lapsed. Evidence exists that preparation to teach in country schools is limited; often young teachers are thrown into the deep end, developing their sense of the job while surviving a more or less radical displacement. While something of this displacement happens for everyone in new working circumstances – and for all novices – our concern here is specifically with teaching English in country high schools, in the many and varied environments that constitute rural Australia. We wanted to explore whether there were distinctive features of such English teaching.

How is English teaching experienced in country schools, and is this different from teaching in city schools? What is rural English teaching like for beginning teachers of English, for more experienced teachers, for Heads of English Departments in rural schools? What do English teachers need to know about their rural students? About rural communities? What needs to happen in teacher education to better understand rural English teaching? How might English teaching and rural schooling be more meaningfully and productively brought together in the interests of Australian education and society? And a further, final question might be, specifically in the context of this Special Issue: What is 'special' about rural English teaching?

A Rural Focus

The resurgence of interest in rural education, along with ongoing attempts to improve education for all students, has drawn attention to new understandings of place, disadvantage, and spatial justice. In this Special Issue, we consider some of these terms and concepts and how they belong to a discourse that historically has marginalised the rural, placing it as 'other' geographically and locating it theoretically in opposition to the city and metrocentric values and practices that conceptualise 'rural' from a deficit perspective. That is, rural, remote and regional contexts in Australia are typically defined by their 'gaps', 'problems' and 'challenges' that schooling attempts to 'address', 'combat' and 'eradicate'. Instead, we come to this Special Issue with our own experiences of 'rural'. For us, the necessary connections between geography, local industry, history and communities with schooling, are too rich to be classified as deficiencies. For many teachers who have spent a good part of their careers in country schools, working in a rural, regional or remote school has been a highlight of their working life. They talk of the agency to localise curricula, the rewarding lifestyle, enhanced professional experiences, and the opportunities to contribute to the school and wider community. These emphases have the potential to foster a new rural narrative around the unique resources and strengths of rural communities. Privileging these features encourages new sensitivities to changing educational opportunities in a global world.

A greater awareness, then, is necessary of who is currently telling the stories of rural education

(Roberts et al., 2021), particularly those that highlight deficit perspectives over a focus on benefits and resources, such as the story of declining results in standardised tests like the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which does not account for differences in a 'deeply unequal system' (Rudolph, 2024). Under neoliberal education reforms, writing and its assessment have become practices that confirm stories of disadvantage, and we have reflected on how talk of 'transformation', 'aspiration', 'escape', 'rising above circumstances', and other ideas encountered in relation to rural education, contribute to the deficit discourse that exists in relation to remote communities. Teaching and learning activities in English have the potential to explore and create counter-narratives to such discourses. We recognise that English teachers and teaching positively contribute to students' sense of identity by building relationships with and awareness of place and community and by supporting rural students to challenge their deficit positioning in educational research and policy.

For this Special Issue, we saw an opportunity to focus on English teaching in rural contexts, with all of us having taught in rural schools, in varying circumstances and at one time or another, and having subsequently recognised its peripheral but emerging and consolidating status as a field of research over the past two decades. While recently there has there been a resurgence of interest in rural schooling and in rural education more generally, there has been less attention given specifically to English teaching. Subject English is often considered central in school curricula – by its teachers and school leaders – and its relationship to literacy earns the subject particular interest and scrutiny by stakeholders. We seek here to address the impact of this unique position by presenting a range of perspectives on the distinctive features of English teaching as they apply to country schools, including text selection, standardised assessment, leadership, and writing pedagogies, to name just a few.

Skewing English?

Nonetheless, evidence is mounting of the worrying state of play of English teaching in rural schools, in the contemporary situation. Some of this concerns the teaching workforce – teacher shortages, increased teaching-out-of-field, lack of opportunity for sustained and sustainable professional development, resignations and the like. Some of the evidence highlights the challenges associated with increasing regulation, standardisation, and testing, in particular, the effects of NAPLAN. Jo O'Mara, in a recent conference abstract, suggested that all these issues contribute to what she describes, perhaps provocatively, as 'skewing English': a forced shift in what subject English is supposed to be at its best, and by implication at least, a version that is cause for concern, professionally and intellectually. She indicates that, in the state of Victoria, many rural and regional schools are finding it difficult to attract and maintain staff – a situation long-observed in rural education research and scholarship. O'Mara (2024) writes that 'there are now many schools with very few subject English-trained teachers. English teaching positions in these schools are often still vacant or filled with out-of-field secondary teachers and primary teachers'. This issue is apparently being investigated by the Victorian Association of Teachers of English (VATE) by way of surveys and other forms of practice-based qualitative inquiry – an initiative that might well be extended to other states, as it is a crucial area of national concern.

The critical point here, however, is that this intriguing notion of a 'skewed' English – seen as increasingly evident in some rural school settings – raises the question of *what constitutes subject English, and for whom?* – a revisiting of the question of subject identity: what does English teaching look like? From a policy perspective, the Australian Curriculum points to language, literacy and literature as key components, ideally in a properly integrated and synthesised form. But how does all this play out on the ground, in rural and remote English classrooms? What does English look like, *in different locales*, and moreover, outside the cities? Already there are some signs that a form of English-as-Literacy is emerging, but of a skills-oriented, technical kind, amenable to direct instruction and transmission teaching, that is, a 'teaching' and 'training' focus. Is this one consequence, at worst, of drawing teachers from other subject-areas or levels of schooling into subject English? What gets lost from the 'curriculum project of English' when this kind of thing increasingly happens?

Something we particularly want to consider here is the significance of NAPLAN, undoubtedly a key feature in lower-secondary English teaching because (beyond Years 3 and 5) testing occurs specifically in Years 7 and 9. Literacy is a key aspect of NAPLAN, although the kind of literacy remains a matter of considerable debate. Disadvantage emerges as a continuing outcome

across the social field (Larsen, 2024) and, given our focus here, is especially marked in and across rural, regional and remote schools. While it is by no means the case that NAPLAN is all that happens in secondary English classrooms, or that it necessarily dominates the English curriculum, enough evidence exists now that it has had a profound effect. Some would argue that it has 'skewed' the subject, at least in some instances and to some extent. Susanne Gannon continues her investigation of the effects of NAPLAN and its standardised or official literacies on English in this Special Issue, specifically addressed to writing and the rural. Recent work on rural literacies is relevant here, with rich possibilities for more intensive integration with English teaching, especially in its more place-oriented realisations.

What should also be noted is that the negative effects of NAPLAN arguably extend into the senior school and potentially influence the final senior English examinations. Teese (2013) noted some time ago that a correlation can be observed between Year 3 NAPLAN literacy outcomes and HSC achievement, along with a pattern of social and educational disadvantage. It is at least likely that this continues throughout the NAPLAN program, extending as it does from primary to secondary schooling, especially if such a testing regime narrows the scope and possibility of English teaching. It is fitting, then, that this Special Issue contains papers not only on NAPLAN but on the final ('exit') examination, in various states and territories, in the context of senior English teaching in rural Australia. There remains important work to do here. If there is a narrowing and constraining effect by standardised testing and high-stakes examination on subject English, in its fullest expression, then that is cause for worry. This is especially the case for rural English teaching, which in many instances is positioned vulnerably, relative to the metropolis.

A Matter of (In)difference?

Something that strikes us now is that, while we began rather hopefully perhaps with a sense of something different about English teaching in rural schools, that was not what tended to emerge in our work on the Special Issue. Rather, there remained more a feeling, for many, that subject English was more or less stable across sites, in principle at least. In the case of English, rural knowledges seem to be distinct from more established, academic-disciplinary knowledge, such as that associated with the school subjects. The (English) knowledge question – what counts as knowledge, and for whom? – remains unresolved, especially given the tendency in English to blur the distinction between curriculum (as knowledge or 'content') and pedagogy, and the significance of experience as a resource for learning and teaching. How might English teachers capitalise on the informal funds of knowledge that their rural students bring into class, their memories and those of their families and communities, their histories, their sense of place, their practical skills and understandings developed out of their engagement and familiarity with local cultures and industries (farming, for instance, or fishing)? How might all this be integrated with familiar professional issues such as text selection, given that which texts are chosen and available to study is sometimes seen as a proxy for knowledge in subject English? In this respect, there may be more possibilities in the writing curriculum – an intriguing point.

There is also a troubling sense that all too often the rural remains largely a matter of *in*difference on the part of many, that while lip-service is paid to the importance of rural English teaching, and increasingly there is recognition that this is something to be attended to, nonetheless making it happens remains elusive and in the end rather gestural. One reason for this is that curriculum policy is still largely metro-centric, in practice. Another is that, for many, the rural is something left behind as things move on: lives, careers, interests, lived concerns, responsibilities. There are always mixed feelings in this regard. Here is one commentary, from a well-known and highly respected English teacher, reflecting on his time spent teaching in the country in the 1970s:

> [E]very few weeks I was off to Melbourne to pick up albums and singles from the import records stores. They were the only shops that stocked the music I liked. Then I'd return to the country with my rare and precious vinyl which helped me keep my links with the 'real' world, reminding me who I was, and preventing me from going native as other young teachers from the city had done. (McClenaghan, 2006, p. 156)

This teacher clearly enjoyed his country teaching and found it rewarding, but also challenging, and we suspect many with similar experience would identify with him. The affective, emotional side of rural experience should not be underestimated. It remains a reference-point for many, albeit often unacknowledged. So the relation between difference and indifference is something that might well be given further thought,

we suggest, regarding this ever complicated issue of English teaching in Rural Australia.

An Overview

In this Issue, the focus on teaching of English in rural settings encompasses five broad topics: text selection, writing assessment and pedagogies, the recreational reading of English teachers, representations in secondary English of rurality and of rural senior English students, and English teacher leadership in schools. Hence we find accounts of both reading and writing, focusing on teachers *and* students, and links projected between literacy testing in junior secondary school and final-year examinations, each arguably with decisive effects on subject English, and perhaps especially so in rural Australia. We are also offered glimpses into literary depictions of rural life, including that provided in Australian crime fiction, or so-called 'rural noir'.

In the first paper ('People, Places, Stories: Australian Prescribed Text Lists and Regional, Rural, and Remote Contexts'), Sally Lamping and Carly Steele offer 'people, places, stories' as a framework through which to critically analyse prescribed text-lists. They contend that regional, remote and rural schooling contexts are geographically and culturally marginalised in the texts prescribed to Senior Secondary literature students in Western Australia, Queensland, and Victoria. As such, the Senior Secondary reading experience affords limited opportunities for many Australian school students to recognise themselves in their reading.

Nicole Heber's paper ('Re-Thinking the Relevant Text: Implications of Text Selection for Rural Secondary English Students') examines the notion of 'relevance' as a possible remedy for tensions within subject English. To do so, Heber outlines the role that 'relevance' plays in relation to text selection in the contemporary English classroom and also in the field of rural literacies more broadly. The paper then focuses on David Metzenthen's *Boys of Blood and Bone* (2003) and its suitability for inclusion as a text for study through the lens of rural literacies and text selection in subject English.

Susanne Gannon ('Teaching Writing in the NAPLAN Era in Regional and Remote Schools: A Rural Report') revisits survey data from a broader study of NAPLAN's influence on writing pedagogies in secondary English to reanalyse the experiences of teachers in remote and regional settings in Queensland and Tasmania. She suggests that while NAPLAN may reinforce some deficit perspectives of rural students, it also highlights challenges in rural schools, including for teachers who are teaching out of their specialist subjects. Nonetheless, Gannon argues, *despite* NAPLAN, rural English teachers are finding ways to open up curriculum possibilities in Australian schools.

A further consideration of writing pedagogies here is Jennifer Dove's paper ('Firefly Intensities: Writing alongside English Secondary Students in Rural Schools'). She writes in response to the absence of student voices in literature about writing pedagogy and the ways in which rural students are silenced in relation to existing measures of writing outcomes. Dove explores the stories of two young people from a small rural town in remote New South Wales as an example of a context-attentive pedagogy that provides opportunities for authentic writing and textualising places and imaginative recreations. According to Dove, these context-attentive pedagogies also recognise the essential professionalism of teachers and their abilities to create rich, contextualised writing activities to assess their students.

In their article on 'Reading Rurally for (Professional) Pleasure: What Constrains the Recreational Reading of Secondary English Teachers in Rural NSW?', Nicole Sanders, Janet Dutton and Kim Wilson present findings from their study of rural teachers reading for pleasure. They observe that the working lives of English teachers in the study from rural areas are influenced by professional pressures such as high workload and increased work intensification, which constrain their recreational reading. This is problematic, they argue, given that the love of reading is central to the teaching of English.

The article by Duncan Driver, Philip Roberts and Jenny Dean ('Distorting Reflections: Senior English and the Representations of Rurality') presents their findings of an investigation into the NSW Senior Secondary English prescribed texts list, to reveal disparities in access, participation and achievement across geographical, social and gender lines, which impact negatively upon students in rural NSW. The article calls for subject English to be more inclusive of 'authentic' rurality to validate rural students' identities and expand the worldviews of all students to include a rural perspective.

By exploring the experiences of a small group of senior rural students in the English component of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), Susan M. Hopkins ('Rural Senior English Students as 'Aussie

Battlers': Bootstrapping Myths in Neoliberal Times') highlights the voices of rural students and examines the positioning that occurs when the experiences of students in rural areas intersect with metropolitan discourses, practices and standards. Hopkins acknowledges that it may be a challenging to accept that VCE English is a metrocentric and unjust institution, and that rural student voices will be crucial to the promotion of a more equitable future for all Australians.

Susan Bradbeer's ('Rural Reimagining: Middle Leadership for English Teachers') article offers ways of conceptualising the role of Head Teachers of English and promoting the development of English teacher leadership in in the context of rural schools. The article endorses disruptive leadership approaches and reflective practices that enable Head of English leaders with a voice and space to be agents of change.

Finally, in this issue we have included two reviews addressing some of the foremost issues affecting teachers and students in rural contexts. One review, by Bill Green, is a critical essay of Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen's book *Teaching English in Rural Communities: Towards a Critical Rural English Pedagogy* (2021). While the book is an account of rural English teaching in the USA, it has clear relevance nonetheless for Australian English teaching. The other is a reflection by Jennifer Dove and Patricia Dowsett on the ways in which they have applied Cara Shipp's (2023) *Listening from the Heart: Rewriting the Teaching of English with First Nations Voices*, to their teaching – something we see as having considerable implication for English and rural schooling more generally.

Across these papers, in summary, questions emerge about the impact of educational policies, the nature of subject English today, the question of rural knowledges, and the English needs of rural students. There is much to build on here.

A Special Issue

In reviewing contributions to this Special Issue on teaching English in Australia, we considered, in particular, how authors addressed qualities of rurality in the papers they sent us. Research that claims to be 'rural' must answer, 'What makes it "rural"?' (Reid, 2020) and this question moved us to look beyond the geographical location of the research and teachers. The rural communities and contexts of the research presented in these papers are both geographically distant from any metropolitan centre and 'outside' the paradigms of metropolitan (or 'metronormative') education, in terms of assumptions about aspiration, availability of subjects and teaching staff, cultural capital, and access to alternative educational experiences. In telling stories of these places, deficit discourse is a significant force. It makes assumptions about the literacy and English needs of rural young people, all while metrocentric representations of place deny broad implications of context. Teachers' voices have been pushed aside in national debates about teaching and few student voices have been sought to provide alternate perspectives of disadvantage and the ways its conceptualisation is related to their lives. This rift between pedagogical practice and students' lived experience negatively impacts learning outcomes (Bass et al., 2020; Honeyford & Watt, 2017), while the construction of disadvantage by policymakers through standardisation and accountability structures has perpetuated rural deficit discourse and led to little improvement in so-called 'gap' indicators.

We acknowledge, of course, the limitations of time and space in this Special Issue, and in particular the need for further work related to technologies in rural English teaching and learning, effective integrations of rural literacies, and proper and respectful engagement with First Nations perspectives. The latter issue, taken up here in various papers on text selection, is sometimes disconnected from studies of the rural, and we note here the important distinctions between research on teaching and learning in rural contexts and research on teaching and learning by First Nations students. But we also want to point to significant overlaps between rural education and Aboriginal education, something which may have been overlooked or minimised previously. What might such overlaps mean for English teaching? For due considerations of language, literacy and literature? For English teachers – beginning, early-career, and more established? For English teacher education? Although we finish here as we began, with questions, our hope is that others will pursue these in the interests of rich English teaching practices in rural schools.

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People, Places, Stories

People, Places, Stories: Australian Prescribed Text Lists and Regional, Rural, and Remote Contexts

Sally Lamping, Carly Steele, Curtin University

'Because Australia is so big in land area. … Perth to Melbourne would be like walking from London to Moscow, we're talking that sort of distance. And people don't imagine for a minute that the stories of people from, say France, are the same as the stories for people in Serbia.'
– Claire G. Coleman

Abstract: In this article, we use a simple framework of 'people, places, stories' to analyse Senior Secondary English literature prescribed text lists from three Australian states, with a specific focus on Western Australia. Drawing on our own context in Western Australia, we define the complexities that contribute to English education in a state of incredible vastness and diversity. We argue that for many Australian adolescents, the Senior Secondary reading experience is a perpetual window, with limited opportunities to see the people, places and stories that build from students' own mirrors, unclouded by deficit narratives of their regional, rural and remote (RRR) contexts and knowledges. In looking at the people of Australia, we include students, their families and their communities, and we consider the authors on these reading lists: Who is telling these stories, whose stories are they, and who are they for? When we consider place, we unpack the language around RRR definitions of place, how they are articulated in these lists, and what that means for a country built on colonisation. Finally, we discuss the way stories are conveyed in set texts and what stories are told by the text lists and annotations themselves. We argue that the dissonance can be addressed through more qualitative representation of diverse RRR groups in prescribed texts. We offer 'people, places, stories' as an analytical framework, used at the macro level to critically analyse prescribed text lists while simultaneously enabling fine-grained analysis of individual texts.

Keywords: Regional Rural Remote, Senior Secondary English, prescribed texts, representation

Introduction

Literature can offer students a backdrop to all of Australia's history, exposing the real stories of those who have been silenced, marginalised and ignored. In writing about how and what texts we teach adolescents, Louise Rosenblatt (1956) aptly argued that humans must be able to 'live through' (p. 66) texts in order to make meaning that is relevant to their experiences and places in the world. Adolescence is defined as a sensitive period, when reading becomes a predictor of long-term positive social-cognitive skills, increased social awareness, decreased isolating factors, and elevated sociocultural processing (Kannan et al., 2023). Recent Australian studies have underscored this through critiques of prescribed and suggested text lists (McLean Davies et al., 2022; McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2022). Understanding and enabling an adolescent reader to critically experience a text, including making classroom space for the people, places and stories that shape their knowledges, is critical for facilitating teaching and learning that both sees students and stretches their thinking (Bishop, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1956). Phillips (2019) argues that when these relationships with curriculum are made possible, they can also 'enable students to deconstruct neo/colonial discourses' and guide 'them – whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous – to explore and comprehend the cultural power accumulated by the exclusion of key narratives, experiences, and knowledge-perspectives of Indigenous Australian peoples in the contemporary record' (p. 10). The 'live circuit' (Rosenblatt, 1956,

p. 70) between readers and books is both material and relational; it can exist when students have access to texts that enable the people, places, and stories of their personal landscapes to be seen alongside those that are unfamiliar. We argue that this is especially important in regional, rural and remote (RRR) contexts, where prescribed text lists offer unique opportunities to critically question how literary knowledge is shaped, perceived and perpetuated in the Australian Literature classroom.

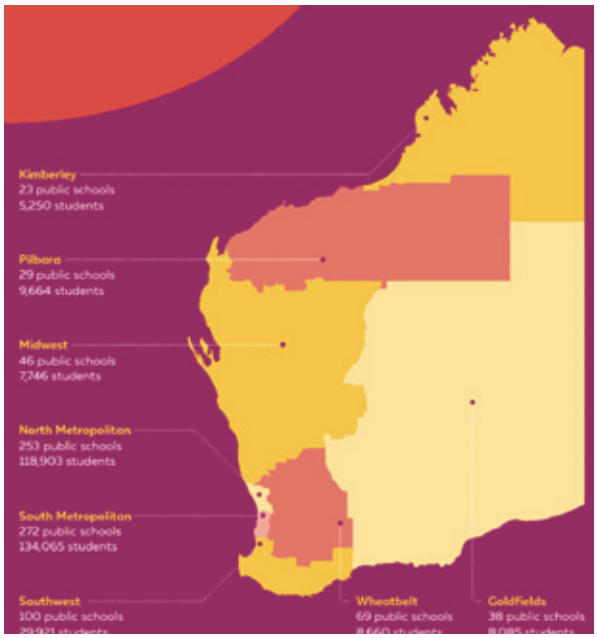
In this article, we use our simple framework of 'people, places, stories' to analyse prescribed text lists for Senior Secondary literature classes from three Australian states, with a specific focus on Western Australia. Echoing Rosenblatt (1956), Bishop's (1990) seminal work argued that texts should mirror the identities of individuals in the classroom, provide windows into experiences and lives that are different from readers', and open sliding glass doors into worlds that readers can enter temporarily. Bishop's (1990) work has been used to critically interrogate book lists that represent singular views of race, class, ethnicity, culture, gender, and religious and sexual identity, which have long served to silence diverse voices in classrooms. In this paper, we expand Bishop's (1990) criteria to include context as a significant factor in shaping a textual mirror, arguing that where and how a student is located influences how they see themselves and others. We argue that for many Australian adolescents, the Senior Secondary reading experience is a perpetual window, offering limited opportunities to see the people, places and stories that build from students' own mirrors, unclouded by deficit narratives of RRR contexts and knowledges (Reid et al., 2010). Our framework uses people, places and stories to locate Bishop's (1990) work in the textual landscape of Australia; it draws on Reese's (2018) Critical Indigenous Literacies framework, expanding it to also include discussions around knowledge and how it is formed and used when relating to texts (Phillips, 2019; Phillips et al., 2022). In looking at the people of Australia, we include our students, their families and communities, and we consider the authors on these lists: Who is telling these stories, whose stories are they, and who are they for? When we consider place, we unpack the language around RRR definitions of place, how place is articulated in these lists and what this means for a country with a history of invasion and ongoing colonisation. Finally, we discuss the way stories are conveyed in these texts and what stories are being told by the text lists themselves.

RRR teaching and learning contexts in Western Australia

We are located on the unceded lands of the Whadjuk Noongar people, in Boorloo/Perth, the capital city of WA. WA is Australia's largest state by geographical area; it comprises 32.9% of Australia's land mass (Geoscience Australia, 2023) and is nearly ten times the size of the United Kingdom (Beazley, 2023). The distance between our RRR contexts can be somewhat incomprehensible to those outside of WA. Despite its large geographical size, nearly four out of every five Western Australians reside in Perth and the southwest corner of the state (ABS, 2022); the rest of the population is dispersed across its vast landscape, as illustrated in Figure 1. While most of WA's secondary school students reside in Perth, in 2022 approximately 23.65% of Year 7–12 students were attending one of 141 regional, remote or very remote schools (ACARA, 2022). The most remote of these schools have the highest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student populations (ACARA, 2022).

Figure 1

Public school map, Western Australia



Note. Reprinted from Department of Education Western Australia (2023). *Annual Report 2022–23*. DoE WA. p. 29. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Because of WA's relative isolation, its histories, stories, peoples, cultures and languages are highly place-based and uniquely tied to context. This storied and interconnected country is best depicted in the *AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia*, but even this map is only an attempted representation of Country (AIATSIS,

1996). The communities across WA are geographically and culturally distinct, and distant, from the realities of those who live in Perth, for example, and the disparities between one RRR school and another are also significant, as these schools experience varying levels of geographic isolation. This means that while the experiences of students in these locations will be similar to those of many adolescents (extensive use of handheld technology, increased social commitments and challenges, exploration of risks/risky behaviours, competing interests and commitments outside of school, newfound independence and interdependence with peers, etc.), their RRR contexts will determine how some of these hallmarks of adolescence unfold.

Teaching in RRR contexts can present challenges for the Australian teacher workforce. Approximately 76% of Australian teachers are female and between the ages of 30 and 59, and 15% work in RRR classrooms (AITSL, 2023). Two per cent of the teaching workforce identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ACDE, 2018) and in WA this figure is even lower, at 1.2% (Gower et al., 2022). WA's five initial teacher education programs are all located in Perth, with online offerings available throughout Australia. It can be concluded that many WA teachers have lived or been educated in cities and, consequently, have limited connections to difficult-to-staff regional, rural, and remote school contexts in WA.

The uniqueness of our WA context positions us to take up Parton and Azano's (2022) call for a 'critical stance' (p. 172) on place in English education and apply it to the prescription of texts in Senior Secondary literature classrooms – specifically the ways these texts match and mismatch with students in these contexts. This includes owning the rationale behind choices, annotations, the ways that settler standpoints and knowledge might influence these lists (Phillips, 2019; Thomson, 2023), and the messages the lists communicate to our students about what kinds of people, places and stories are valued. These messages can be easily disrupted by considering how texts can more accurately mirror Australia while also providing crucial insights (i.e., windows and sliding glass doors) for RRR students' city-dwelling counterparts.

Prescribed text lists: Overview and methodology

We offer three snapshots of the Senior Secondary literature reading lists in Queensland, Victoria and WA. In all three states, students who undertake these courses are on university pathways. While each state has a prescribed text list and teachers must choose from these respective lists for Senior Secondary (Units 3 & 4) literature classrooms, no state in our study mandates the reading of any one author. Instead, each state has annotations and guidelines for how these lists should be used, which we draw on to shape our analysis. We compare Queensland's text list to WA's, as they have similar RRR profiles. We have also included Victoria; due to its smaller geographical size and larger population, it is the Australian state most unlike WA. We are interested in the ways these lists articulate messages about the kinds of people, places and stories that are valued in secondary contexts, and we see an opportunity for a 'critical stance' (Parton & Azano, 2022, p. 172) to transform the ways in which we teach and learn through these lists.

Methodology

Our study is situated within both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. In the first instance, we mapped the quantitative data about the text types on each list. This was followed by qualitative analysis to determine geographic information about the authors and texts on each list. Next, we conducted a qualitative critical content analysis. This offered a more in-depth analysis of author and text representation, going beyond numerical representation to consider, in keeping with our conceptual framework, the people, places and stories contained therein. We note that these approaches were interrelated and dialogic; we were not able to accurately perform the quantitative portion of this study without simultaneously engaging in qualitative methods that served to expand and problematise the RRR label.

For the initial quantitative analysis, we organised a series of tables, beginning with the text types included in each state's list (each state uses different nomenclature for these text types). For each text type, we counted the number of authors included, distinguishing between Australian and international authors. Because our primary focus was to document the ways in which these texts shape a story of Australia for students, the international authors identified immediately formed their own category, for which only limited further analysis was conducted.

Our quantitative work was then informed by a qualitative analysis of the prescribed text lists. Using university library databases and the broader internet, we collected and analysed biographical information, author interviews, reviews, scholarly articles and texts to gain an overall picture of each Australian author's life

and canon. From this, Author 1 created an annotated list of authors to form the basis of the categorisation and Author 2 cross-checked this information. During this phase, the placement of authors in geographic categories was debated. Authors were initially assigned to geographic categories organised first by country and state and then by metro and RRR jurisdictions. To qualify the geographic categories, we used population, school and road maps of Australia; we investigated the impact of distance from major metropolitan areas on population, healthcare, schooling and transportation, and determined that at approximately 70 km outside of a major metro area, populations decrease and accessing schools, transportation and healthcare becomes more challenging. This informed a flexible parameter for what qualified as an RRR context. As we delved more into authors' lives and texts, interrogating labels associated with location, we realised the title 'People, Places, Stories' would emphasise the interconnected realities, roots and routes that humans use to establish connections to place (Gustafson, 2001). This informed our continued refinement of the tables to centre our work around the complexities of the Australian RRR label and the ways the lists mirrored or ignored the students and stories of Australia.

We drew on our qualitative analysis as we furthered the quantitative work of assembling the tables as accurately as possible. To avoid skewing representation in each text type, authors were counted once per text type even if they had multiple works on the lists in that text type. For example, an author with three novels on the reading lists would only be counted once for that text type. Another challenge was that WA allows for the repetition of authors across text types. Eleven authors on the WA list are therefore used across two text types, and one author, Tim Winton, appears in drama, prose fiction (short stories) and prose fiction (novels). In WA, this meant the overall author count was 232, but the author/text type total was 244. Similarly, Queensland allows for Shakespeare to be repeated in both the External Assessment Texts and Drama Texts (103 total text type authors; 102 authors overall). We debated the impact this would have on calculating geographic representation in the WA and Queensland lists, finally settling on the need to position the text types as the drivers for mapping, noting the importance of seeing how representation mapped into each text type. We counted co-authors individually, as our view is that they co-produce the same text through a negotiated storytelling process; therefore, it is important to note these individual contributions in the mapping of the tables.

We also write from a geographic location where definitions of Country supersede colonial domination of the Australian landscape by about 50,000 years. This pervasive authority uses 'Landscape as a template for developing cross-cutting relations, including by sacralising that which is ready to hand by turning land and sea into Country (capital C Country), thereby relating people with land and sea, with other beings, and with each other' (Graham & Brigg, 2023, p. 597). While the RRR and metro/city categories worked for some authors on these lists, First Nations Australian authors cannot be mapped by these colonial constructs (Phillips, 2019). This work required us to first count all First Nations Australian authors in each text type, being careful to note where lists had errors in identifying First Nations Australian authors and/or the spelling of their names. We then conducted an analysis of author biographies and texts to understand their connections to Countries across Australia, how they identified with these connections and how to document these connections in our tables, being mindful that there are variations in spellings for some language groups, which we have noted where possible. Our tables organise First Nations Australian authors into one category, with references to Country where available. Diversions are noted using three asterisks.

Victoria

In Units 3 and 4, students in the VCE Literature course must study five texts from the Literature Text List, while the sixth text must be an adaptation of one of the five texts from the Literature Text List (VCAA, 2023). The VCE list includes novels, plays, short stories/other literature and poetry. A snapshot of representation in 2024 VCE Literature Text List is given in Table 1. According to the VCAA (2023) guidelines, texts should 'Have literary merit; be an excellent example of form and genre; sustain intensive study, raising interesting issues and providing challenging ideas; reflect current community standards and expectations in the context of Senior Secondary study of texts' and be suitable for students 'from a range of backgrounds and contexts' who represent the cultural diversity of Victoria (p. 1). The list includes texts by settler Australians and First Peoples of Australia as well as new and older texts (including Shakespeare) and intends to reflect global and affirming perspectives. One-third of the authors on the VCE list must be Australian and there is an

Table 1

Analysis of author representation in the 2024 VCE Literature Text List

Texts	First Nations Australian authors	Victorian authors		Australian authors		International authors	Total Authors*
		Melbourne	RRR	Metro	RRR		
Poetry texts	1 (Mununjali)	0	0	1	1	3	6
Drama texts	0	1	0	0	0	7	8
Short stories and other literature	0	0	0	1	1	4	6
Novels	1 (Wiradjuri)	2	0	1	0	5	9
Category totals	2	3	0	3	2	19	29 authors
*Co-authors counted individually							

expectation that teachers will already be familiar with 75% of the texts on the list.

Queensland

The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) offers a similar set of parameters to Victoria, indicating that for Units 1 and 2, schools can choose from outside of the prescribed list, but that students must study six texts from the prescribed list in Units 3 and 4, including one novel, one play, a collection of ten poems, and one film or episode of a television series. The prescribed list includes external assessment texts, novels and prose, plays and drama, film/television/multimodal texts, and poetry. Table 2 provides a snapshot of representation in QCAA's text list.

QCAA (2021) explains how texts will be retired from the list and gives a rationale for using only one author (Shakespeare) twice: this aims to ensure that texts are diverse and represent a clear range of perspectives and experiences. QCAA (2021) does not

Table 2

Analysis of author representation in the QCAA Prescribed Text List Literature 2023–2025

Texts	First Nations Australian authors	Queensland authors		Australian authors		International authors	Total Authors*
		Metro	RRR	Metro	RRR		
Poetry texts	3 (Mununjali, Gomeroi; Yugambeh)	1	0	2	1	9	16
Drama texts	4 (Gamilaroi/Torres Strait Islander; Nunukul and Ngugi; Yamatji and Wongatha; Muruwari)	0	0	2	0	13	19
Novels and prose texts	3 (Waanyi; Wiradjuri; Wirlomin-Noongar)	0	0	6	0	25	34
Film and Television/ Multimodal texts	7 (Gamilaroi; Arrernte and Kalkadoon; Kaytetye; Djinba; Batjala, Mununjali and Wakka Wakka; Gunai/ Kurnai; Wonnarua)	0	1	3	0	16	27
External Assessment Texts (2024)	1 (Wirlomin-Noongar)	0	0	0	0	6	7
Category totals	18	1	1	13	1	69	103
*Co-authors counted individually							

Table 3

Analysis of author representation in the SCSA Literature Prescribed Text Lists 2024: Literature ATAR course

Texts	First Nations Australian authors	Western Australian authors		Australian authors		International authors	Total Authors*
		Perth	RRR	Metro	RRR		
Poetry texts	3 (Munanjali and Birri Gubba; Goenpul, Yagerabul, Minjungbul, and Bundjalung; Quandamooka and Peewee)	3	0	11	4	34	55
Drama texts	4 (Bardi and Nyulnyul; Bibbulmun and Noongar; Injibarndi and Palku; Goa, Gunggari, Wakka Wakka, and Murri)	3	2	11	0	25	45
Prose Fiction (short stories)	4 (Wiradjuri; Munanjali;***)	3	2	12	1	19	41
Prose Fiction (novels)	1 (Wirlomin-Noongar)	3	6	12	8	73	103
Category totals	12	12	10	46	13	151	**244** (authors per text type)

* Co-authors counted individually
** Some authors on the SCSA list appear in more than one text type and have been counted accordingly
*** Archie Weller identifies as Aboriginal and grew up in Boorloo; Tony Birch identifies as Aboriginal, with deep connections to Aboriginal communities in Fitzroy, where he grew up.

assume teachers will be familiar with 75% of texts on the prescribed list; it indicates that texts on the list have been selected for 'merit' and 'style' and to increase engagement, rigour and the intense study of literature while also reflecting the diversity of Australia.

Western Australia

The School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) ATAR Literature Prescribed Text List is recommended for Year 11 and required for Year 12. SCSA provides limited detail on how the texts on the list were chosen and why certain texts were removed or replaced for 2023/2024. The ATAR list includes three text types: poetry, drama and prose fiction (divided into short stories and novels). Table 3 gives an overview of authorship in the SCSA text list.

SCSA requires that one Australian text be studied in every unit pair. For the study of plays, teachers can also include Ibsen, Shakespeare and Shaw, who do not have specific titles included on the prescribed list. Any student who references a text not on the ATAR Literature prescribed list will receive a 15% penalty on the examination; this includes any references outside of the listed texts, even if they are authored by individuals on the list (SCSA, 2024).

People, places, stories: Analysis of the prescribed text lists

People

SCSA's ATAR Literature Prescribed Text list includes 23 RRR Australian authors, 10 of whom are from WA. This far outnumbers the QCAA list, which has two, one from RRR QLD, and the VCE list, which has two RRR Australian authors, none of whom are from Victoria. Among the WA authors are several who were born and raised in regional and rural WA (e.g., Gail Jones, Tim Winton, Craig Silvey, Susan Midalia), but have moved interstate or to Boorloo as adults; these authors' canons include texts situated in RRR contexts. The list also includes Stephen Scourfield, who we counted as an RRR WA writer but who was originally born in Worcestershire. Scourfield has travelled and written about the WA landscape for decades, covering nearly a million kilometres of WA; while not Western Australian by birth, his discussions of WA beyond Perth

are remarkable. Scourfield is an excellent example of an opportunity to unpack Reese's (2018) discussions around authorship and narration with students. Does a person who travels WA but was not born here have the same capacity to situate its RRR landscapes as someone raised in Broome but now living in a city? This may be an opportunity to explore concepts of place with students, drawing on research that offers more expansive definitions of place as related to critical life stages, meaningful encounters and relationships, but not necessarily to places of birth (Gustafson, 2001).

We agree with Jones and Dowsett (2023) that the parochial canon, especially in geographically isolated areas, is something to note. While the SCSA list includes authors who have a place in the regional landscape and depict it in ways that are relevant to students, the reliance on certain texts can be problematised. For example, included in the SCSA list is the commonly taught text *Jasper Jones*, by Craig Silvey, who grew up in regional WA. *Jasper Jones* is not only a coming-of-age story about a boy living in a regional small town, but also an inviting text for adolescents, with a compelling storyline and characters. These types of texts are often excellent pathways into teaching more difficult concepts, as students tend to be consumed by the story and therefore more apt to develop deeper connections with the text. For example, the narration of a First Nations character by a white author is something that must be critically examined in literature classrooms, providing space for students to engage with questions of who is telling Jasper's story, how he is represented and how his presence enables the white characters' sovereignty (Scarcella & Burgess, 2019). These questions can help students and teachers problematise the connections between texts and the lands or perspectives the authors write from, positioning them as worthy of particular provocations for readers (Phillips, 2019; Phillips et al., 2022).

Being able to separate an author's biography from their stories is an important aspect of engaging with literature as art; however, there must also be space within the classroom to consider decisions around what texts are included and whose stories remain untold (Phillips, 2019). The most recent (i.e., 2024, 2024 and 2023–2025, respectively) versions of the VCE, SCSA and QCAA text lists include both Wiradjuri author Tara June Winch and Mununjali author Ellen van Neerven; they are the only two First Nations Australian authors who appear on all three prescribed lists. In Queensland and Victoria, van Neerven is a prescribed poet only; in WA, all their prose pieces from one specific anthology are included, but no poems or other prose. In Victoria and Queensland, Winch's novels are included, but WA includes only her short stories. As noted above, while WA allows for repetition of authors across text types, Victoria does not, and Queensland makes one exception: 'No writer, other than Shakespeare, is represented more than once' (QCAA, 2021, p. 2). Interestingly, however, SCSA indicates that Shakespeare, Shaw and Ibsen can be used freely in the classroom, and VCAA notes that Shakespeare must be included on the prescribed list but is not mandated for teaching. Authors on the SCSA list used across more than one text type include Patrick White, Tim Winton and Peter Carey. First Nations Australian authors are not repeated across multiple text types on any list. We found this curious, as Winch's and van Neerven's works provide opportunities for students to study an author across genres, offering a range of angles and perspectives into their work. Phillips et al. (2022) note that English continues to be used to 'draw students, as citizens, closer to the empire' (p. 174). By permitting the repetition of Shakespeare and, in WA, the more flexible use of Ibsen, Shaw, Shakespeare, Winton, White and Carey throughout Senior Secondary courses but limiting the use of other authors, including those who identify as queer and non-binary, we are left wondering about the perceived audiences for these text lists (Reese, 2018). Is Shakespeare more suitable for adolescents than local or First Nations authors? What does studying Ibsen without comparing his work around gender to the perspectives of non-binary and/or queer authors offer? Recent research has indicated that this silencing of local stories and knowledge in prescribed text lists has been a long-standing practice (Bacalja & Bliss, 2019; McLean Davies et al., 2021), although there have been some successful recent efforts to dismantle it by including more First Nations Australian, regional, rural, and remote authors, especially in WA. It is important, however, to consider how the subtext about what can be included continues the agenda of exclusion, glossing over the Australian context and countering progress towards a 'proper sense of its place and history' (Graham & Brigg, 2023, p. 597). Providing students and teachers with opportunities to discuss these lists together helps everyone negotiate these questions, not only in their own reading and critical stance to literature, but in their own writing and text production.

Places

We argue here that an author's experiences, including the places making up their storied landscapes, influence the way they produce their art. This includes how places and the experiences one has in them shape one's knowledge and approach to storytelling. Places are also part of what readers bring with them to a story – their own sense of experiences, attachments and styles of production (Rosenblatt, 1956). Being able to locate oneself as a reader in a familiar context and landscape is just as important as being able to stretch oneself into unfamiliar landscapes. In WA, 62% of the authors on the prescribed list are international; in QLD, 67%; and in Victoria, 66%. Exposure to international perspectives in literature is a way to reorient a reader's sense of place, providing them with potential windows and sliding glass doors into worlds that may be unfamiliar (Bishop, 1990); this can help students see themselves in and stretch themselves into texts. When we examined these authors and texts further, however, our assumptions about strong international perspectives adding to the diversity of voices on the reading lists were challenged. For example, among the novelists on the lists, English-speaking Global North representation was high (in WA, about 81%, in QLD 88% and in Victoria, 100%). Curiosities remained as we analysed these lists. For example, we found little representation of first- or second-generation migrant communities in RRR contexts, despite their significant roles in Australia's postcolonial history. In looking more closely at migrant authors from RRR backgrounds on these lists, we found that for VCE, the number was one in 29; QCAA has one second-generation migrant out of 103 authors; SCSA includes two first- and second-generation migrants out of 244 authors. We argue for the importance of these perspectives in the Australian textual landscape. They are opportunities for students and teachers to examine depictions of place from yet another standpoint. For example, George Miller's *Mad Max*, which is on the QCAA text list, strategically intertwines the remote landscape and a renegade mindset, giving way to a setting that is visually and emotionally expansive, yet void. We cannot disassociate Miller's rural upbringing as a second-generation Greek migrant from these moving images. They are iconic and offer a particular perspective of an 'unknown' remote landscape.

We turn to VCAA's (2023) prescribed text list and some of the language in its rationale to further our interrogation of these choices. The guidelines for schools and teachers indicate that 'Approximately 75% of the texts on the list would be expected to be familiar* to most VCE Literature teachers' (VCAA, 2023, p. 1). The asterisk signifies a qualification given later in the rationale: 'Familiar texts can include canonical texts, texts that have been acknowledged in the public domain as significant through mechanisms like awards or accolades' and 'texts of literary merit' (VCAA, 2023, p. 1). As Thomson (2024) notes, decisions around canonical texts are to be queried and unpacked, as they have long been influenced by normative practices to bring the study of literature closer to 'the empire' (Phillips et al., 2022), but the ways in which the canon and award lists represent place and its connection to the individual have not been fully explored. The phrasing 'familiar to *most* VCE Literature teachers' (VCAA, 2023 p. 1, our italics) is a normative construction based on who those teachers are assumed to be. Presently, most Australian teachers are middle-aged women raised in Australian cities. To make decisions on the basis of what 'most' teachers are familiar with will ultimately exclude First Nations peoples and their knowledges, along with other minority groups who may reside in RRR locations. We are thus wary of advice that indicates a booklist ensures 75% of the texts would be familiar to teachers because they are considered as such in the public domain, have won prestigious awards and are viewed as having 'literary merit' (VCAA, 2023, p. 1). What texts are silenced when determining familiarity? How is literary merit communicated in these lists? The answers to these questions will continue to evade us without more courageous efforts to consider place and ontology as part of the story of literary merit and text selection.

Stories

Each text list also tells its own story of attempts to be more quantitatively inclusive of place and perspective, with high numbers of international authors, more inclusion of First Nations Australian, non-binary and queer perspectives, and in WA and Queensland, more RRR perspectives than ever before. But each list, in its own way, also successfully continues the white urban Global North frame of reference in the story it tells. SCSA continues to include only three categories of texts, and VCE includes four. These are valuable texts, but they are also mostly print-based. QCAA's list includes five text types, although its external assessment texts are mostly novels. Nevertheless, we found that the inclusion of one additional category

(film, television and multimodal texts) meant that seven additional First Nations Australian authors from lands and language groups all over Australia could be included in the QCAA list. This inclusion also supports a worldview that stories are not contained solely in print-based mechanisms, but are an expansive and multimodal part of the human experience (see also Steele, Dovchin & Oliver, 2022). When we include only print-based materials in text lists, entire centuries of storytelling in the Australian landscape are silenced. Multimodal texts not only offer this possibility for qualitative inclusion, they also offer more nuanced windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990), organically enabling students to use multiple repertoires to engage with the texts and further establish the 'live circuit' (Rosenblatt, 1956, p. 70).

Phillips et al. (2022) write that understanding Indigenous relationality means centring the relationship between people and land, understanding that their lateral, relational autonomies are interdependent – a First Nations Australian could live in Melbourne for three generations while maintaining connections to the expansive Noongar Nation in WA, with other interconnected relations to people, places and their stories all over Australia. The process of mapping First Nations Australian authors by Country in our tables underscored an Australian story marked by colonisation and forced removal, with some authors identifying across several groups and others not being able to identify lineage beyond Aboriginality. As two non-Indigenous authors, we can never fully understand the complexities of Country, and we aren't meant to, but as teachers and researchers we must engage in work that respects Aboriginal authority and rights to self-identify (Graham & Brigg, 2023). Truth-telling has an important place in Australian literature, and the study of these texts should not avoid the pervasiveness of Australia's truth. Across all the lists, however, First Nations storytelling in both print and multimodal forms is limited (7% of all texts on the Victorian list, 17% in QLD, and 9% in WA). Further, although approximately 31 First Nations Australian language and/or cultural groups are represented across all three lists, with some authors positioned across multiple First Nations Australian language and cultural groups and others unable to identify ancestors, this represents only a small percentage of First Nations Australia and its authorship (AIATSIS, 1996). With at least four First Nations publishing houses in Australia and numerous First Nations award winners, including of the coveted Miles Franklin Award, Stella Prize and Australian Book Industry Awards, there are no more excuses. Not only were First Nations Australian voices infrequent on these lists, the writing of First Nations authors was described in annotations as non-linear, bold, experimental, unconventional and uncompromising, and several of their texts came with warnings for sensitive content and language, demonstrating the ways in which literature is appraised from normative Western literary expectations (VCAA, 2023, pp. 6–20).

Phillips et al. (2022) argue that while the stories told about Country need to be different, 'we also need to learn to read differently', and further, that this type of reading 'cannot be left to master key learning' (p. 175). Xavier Herbert's *Poor fellow my Country* (SCSA) defies master key learning, as do Wright's *Carpentaria* (QLD), Enoch's *Black Medea* (QLD), Lui's *Black is the New White* (QLD) and countless other texts by First Nations Australian authors and allies. These require a 'pedagogy that locates the reader in the world, on place, aware of place, and connectedness and makes the reader critically conscious of their own standpoint' (Phillips et al., 2022, p. 175; see also Phillips, 2019). The stories within and behind the prescribed text lists narrate a particular Australia and sanction prescriptive ways of storytelling, disregarding the capacities of teachers to learn how to read and teach literature differently, to take a careful approach and to learn to be vulnerable alongside their students. This is the way literature can destabilise a narrative, a perspective and a worldview.

Conclusion

RRR schooling contexts are not only geographically isolated, but also culturally isolated in terms of representation in school curricula, as we have shown via the texts prescribed to Senior Secondary literature students in WA, Queensland, and Victoria. The impact is keenly felt by both students and teachers, who aim to connect with students, their lives and the broader community but instead, as we have argued, face a perpetual window. This dissonance can be addressed though greater representation of diverse RRR groups in prescribed texts, and through the critical analysis of texts in the Senior Secondary literature classroom. To this end, we have offered 'people, places, stories' as an analytical framework that can be used both at the macro level to critically analyse prescribed text lists, and for the fine-grained analysis of individual texts, as presented in our illustrative examples. By exploring the

'people, places, stories' of texts – told or otherwise – we hope to find a point of connection for students and teachers in RRR contexts.

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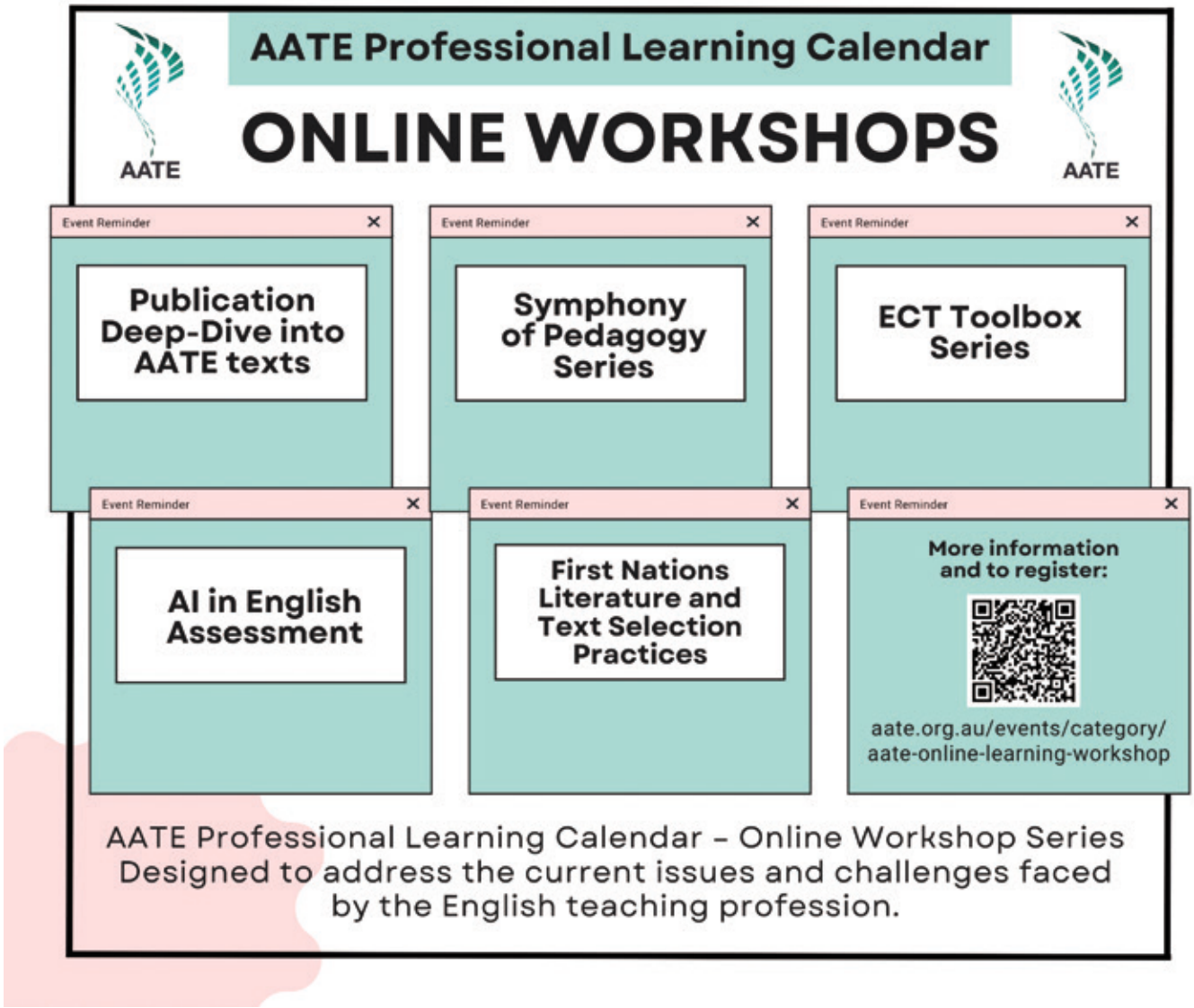

Re-thiking the Text

Re-thinking the Relevant Text: Implications of Text Selection for Rural Secondary English Students

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Abstract: Recent calls for an understanding of literacies specific to rural areas intersect with the concept of relevance – a concept which has its own distinct history in the English classroom. This paper therefore briefly recounts the emergence of relevance as a remedy for the conflicts within subject English, and outlines the role that it plays both in relation to text selection in the contemporary English classroom and in the field of rural literacies. Drawing on McLean Davies's (2012) understanding of text selection and teaching as the enactment of relationships between students and texts in differing proximity to one another, the paper reconsiders a novel that I taught in my first year of teaching at a rural school: David Metzenthen's *Boys of blood and bone* (2003). Considering this text and its selection in light of the concept of relevance, I question the way in which relevance, as it is enacted, reflects a simplistic correspondence between text and life. In its place, I argue for a specific, spatially-oriented understanding of reading and text selection in the rural English classroom, in which the text mediates the (potential) distance between the spaces of teacher and student.

Keywords: rural education, text selection, rural literacies, relevance

As a first-year English teacher at a rural school, I became interested in the role played by relevance in the process of text selection among English staff. In particular, I was curious about the rationale for selecting David Metzenthen's *Boys of blood and bone* (2003) for our Year 11 cohort, as the novel was deemed relevant in part because its setting so closely resembled the school's own rural setting. When, several years later, I completed a research project that investigated the implications of selecting culturally relevant texts for rural secondary students in subject English, I discovered that the impetus to teach relevant texts emerges from two distinct directions: from within the field of rural literacies, and the discipline of English itself.

Whereas relevance has been a focus of discussion in subject English for half a century, the drive to increase educational relevance for rural students is relatively new. For over a decade now, the field of rural literacies, situated predominantly in America and Australia, has sought to foreground relevance for rural students by understanding literacy as being inextricable from practice and place rather than being defined in relation to an abstracted norm (Comber, 2015; Donehower, Hogg & Schell, 2007, 2012; Green & Corbett 2013). Theorists of rural literacies call on teachers to forge a relevant education for their students by attending to the ways in which literate practices enable rural people to live their lives attuned to surrounding and context.

And yet, as Green (2013) notes, this contemporary mode of theorising literacy is necessarily outward-looking, 'addressed … to textual practice outside or beyond the schools' (p. 23). This 'sharp and enduring disjunction' (Green, 2013, p. 23) between academic consensus and classroom practice, he states, detracts from the power of the critique, as it renders contemporary theorising 'gestural' rather than 'real' (p. 23). As a consequence, scholarship in rural literacies may also offer limited utility for educators. However, when rural teachers, acting under the rubric of rural literacies, select texts they believe will be relevant to their rural students, the 'gestural' movement of rural literacies becomes 'real'. Thus, the rural English classroom represents a point of convergence between rurality and English education, and a rigorous examination of the implications of text selection for rural students necessitates a

consideration of relevance from both the perspective of rural literacies and scholarship relating to subject English.

Before outlining the literature relating to rural literacies and the English classroom, I will attend to some historical and contemporary modes of understanding the role played by relevance when selecting texts in subject English. I will then reconsider both the novel *Boys of blood and bone* and the rationale for its selection through the lens of rural literacies and text selection in subject English.

Relevance and subject English

With its sustained emphasis on the valuing of students' experiences, lives and home environments, Dixon's *Growth through English* (1967) marks a turning point in any discussion of relevance in English. This text is the defining publication to emerge from the Dartmouth Seminar, officially entitled the Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English, held in 1966. The Seminar's contributors came together to discuss the guiding question 'What is English?' Their response to this question as it bears upon the teaching of texts – although far from unanimous (Harris, 1991) – is elaborated in Squire's *Response to literature* (1968). When Dixon proposed the 'growth' model, he positioned it as a successor to both the 'skills' and the 'cultural heritage' models of English teaching. Whereas the former focused on the technical aspects of English expression, the latter model viewed English as the process of inducting students into the English canon, viewed in the Arnoldian tradition as the finely-wrought expressions of a gifted few, and ultimately constituting a 'criticism of life' (Dixon, 1967, pp. 2–3). For Dixon and a number of his peers, however, subject English was of value insofar as it enabled students to express, reconstitute and give form to their own experience. For Dixon (1967), the engagement with literature always begins with 'me': only after making a personal connection to the text may the reader engage with the text as text, so that there may then be a 'natural movement from subject to object and back again' (p. 59).

The sense of optimism that pervades both *Growth through English* and *Response to literature* is in marked contrast to Britton and Squire's (1975) foreword to the updated version of the former, published less than a decade after Dartmouth. Reviewing Dixon's text 'in the perspective of the seventies', the capacity for the concept of 'growth' to function as a panacea was already clear to these authors, who point out that in the preceding decade, the concept of relevance had rapidly 'developed more interpretations … than any one word can usefully bear' (Britton & Squire, 1975, p. xiii). Not only this, the growth model and its emphasis on relevance had become 'a desperate attempt to use curriculum change as one way of tackling the growing hostility of pupils in inner-city secondary schools to school and all that it stood for' (Britton & Squire, 1975, p. xiii). The foreword suggests that there had been a dual inversion of the terms 'response' and 'relevance'. On the one hand, although 'response' is a more apt characterisation of the way the Dartmouth attendees envisioned students engaging with texts, 'relevance' has become the popular catchcry, bearing an interpretative weight that was never envisioned by Dixon (1967) and, presumably, subsuming the complexity of literary response inherent within the growth model. On the other hand, quite a different sense of response emerges: relevance as (wholly inadequate) response to crisis and disaffection. As a result, literary response becomes conflated with relevance; conversely, relevance becomes the 'desperate' response to an education system in crisis.

This sense of responsiveness – as a means of mitigating crisis – is reinforced in Teese's *Academic success and social power* (2013). For Teese (2013), rather than shoring up English as a school subject, the turn towards 'growth' only rendered visible the fact that English, as a subject, was without conceptual structure or legitimacy, and intrinsically dependent on a fixed social hierarchy. If at every stage of curricular reform the hierarchical values embodied in a discipline that began as a means of schooling the elite have reasserted themselves, then for Teese (2013), structural reform represents the only hope for greater equity. Thus relevance plays a role in inequity, because it is not given equal weight when selecting texts for all students. Teese (2011, 2013) has demonstrated how the selection of 'classic' or 'literary' texts reinforces the privileges of students at well-resourced schools, because they are able to be schooled in a particular discursive tradition and to participate in a range of interpretive practices that are less accessible to students reading more relevant texts. Although one might expect that the broader range of options offered to teachers would allow them to select texts that play to their students' strengths, according to Teese (2011, 2013), the biases inherent in text selection and the teaching of literature only tend to entrench inequality of outcome.

This pattern – relevance as response to crisis and/or failure – is evident not just in the twentieth century, but also in the preceding and succeeding centuries. Beavis (1996) relates how the National Board's chief inspector criticised the unfamiliarity of the *Irish National Readers* presented to students in Victoria during the mid to late 1800s, raising 'the issue of the representation of the familiar' (p. 18). This led to the introduction of the *Australian Reader* in 1882, which depicted 'bushfires, gold discoveries [and] the Eureka uprising' (Blake, 1973, as cited in Beavis, 1996, p. 18). In the twenty-first century, Hastie and Sharplin (2012) have described the process of text selection as a veritable hall of mirrors: in high socioeconomic areas, teachers respond to students' expectations – expectations which themselves have been inculcated in them by the expectations of their parents. Reading between the lines of Hastie and Sharplin's (2012) study, it is clear that relevance is a factor only when reading ability is in doubt: the 'Literature Kids' are exposed to challenging and 'sophisticated' texts, whereas lower-ability students are perceived to need a text 'that's relevant to them' (p. 41).

The image painted by Beavis (1996), of a layered (or fractured) curriculum that has become embodied and embedded within a modern text list, is an apt one for a subject that has tended to incorporate rather than resolve its differences. The historical accounts of the developments and ruptures in subject English given by Teese (2011, 2013) and Beavis (1996) align in many ways but diverge significantly in others – and certainly it would be interesting, although not directly relevant here, to consider how these differences might arise from Teese's background as a sociologist and historian of education as opposed to Beavis's view from 'inside' the teaching of subject English. Both authors demonstrate that the subject embodies existing sociocultural hierarchies, and is perfused by contingency and instability. However, whereas Beavis's (1996) image of a layered curriculum suggests adaptability and durability in response to change, Teese (2011, 2013) foregrounds its brittleness – after the convulsions of the 1960s, he states, English only retained its status as a school subject at all due to its traditional, privileged position in the social hierarchy. Where Beavis (1996) foregrounds the weight placed upon the subject – in the quote above, she notes the 'weight' borne by English, and elsewhere refers to the 'weight the set text was expected to bear' (p. 18) – Teese (2011, 2013) renders these 'abstractions' as light as air. Finally, whereas Beavis's (1996) account lauds the capacious and adaptable qualities of English, and the new 'possibilities for expansion' (p. 35) enabled by 'the new theory' (p. 34) of deconstruction, Teese (2011, 2013) is subtly contemptuous of English teachers' refusal to define their subject. The differences between Teese's and Beavis's accounts suggest that there are two facets of relevance. On the one hand, relevance is expansive, broadening the field of texts available to students and eliminating the hierarchy between canonical and popular texts. On the other hand, relevance accommodates: at the same time as it ostensibly adapts subject English to better meet the needs of its students, it functions to reproduce its inherent inequities. Insofar as relevance is incompatible with the elitist foundations of English, students who are exposed to relevant texts are penalised: English, even as it adapts and survives, stagnates.

Currently, the consensus on relevance as a criterion for text selection appears to be 'yes, and also …'. To take one example, Doecke (1997) affirms relevance as one of multiple strategies that teachers use to engage students in reading, noting 'the enormous value of texts that appeal to [students'] regional interests and loyalties' (p. 68). Doecke makes it clear that similitude is not a necessary condition upon which to select a text, but that it is a reasonable one. The work of McLean Davies (2008, 2009, 2012), which examines the process of text selection in schools in the context of debates concerning the teaching of Australian literature, draws on the link between 'text and subjectivity' to argue that there is a need for relevance; this link, however, 'also reminds us of the connection texts can forge between the 'self' and 'others'' (Maclean Davies, 2008, p. 49). She therefore argues for 'a nexus approach' which explores the connection between 'individuals, texts and society' (McLean Davies, 2008, p. 50). Elsewhere, McLean Davies (2012) urges the use of the concept of 'proximity' to undertake a critical reengagement with text selection practices. Using the National Year of Reading to revivify discussion of text selection, McLean Davies (2012) recommends that teachers ask themselves a range of questions, one of which is most salient here: 'How would you describe the proximity of students to the texts they are studying?' (p. 12). Ultimately, McLean Davies (2012) argues that students should be exposed to both proximate and distancing texts: although teachers may 'select texts because we feel that students will be able to 'relate to them'', they also should allow 'students to experience a range of

proximate relationships to text', and explore 'different ways of experiencing Australia and the world' (p. 15).

Rural literacies

This movement between proximity and distance resonates strongly with the accounts of teachers in Eckert and Alsup's (2015) *Literacy teaching and learning in rural communities: Problematizing stereotypes, challenging myths*, a collection written in the context of American rural secondary schools. In spite of the difficulties in defining 'the rural' (Roberts, 2021) – and it is certainly worth continuing to ask what, if anything, defines rural students in general – the collection speaks of the commonality of teachers' experiences in rural schools, if only in terms of the contradictions and difficulties that emerge when place-based education and rural literacies are taken up in relation to reading. Furthermore, it is particularly enlightening to consider how relevance arises as a response to these challenges.

Two salient elements emerge from these narratives. The first is the position of the English teacher as a 'stranger' and/or an 'outsider', an issue that was identified as worthy of further investigation in Eckert and Petrone's (2013) examination of English teaching in rural education. Noting that many rural American communities are relatively culturally and racially homogeneous, the teacher of multicultural or diverse texts – who may or may not be born into the same community – becomes the sole mediator of difference: a 'representative of outside culture' for a 'racially homogenous and geographically isolated community' (Eckert & Petrone, 2013, p. 77). The second point is that the complexities of the relationship between 'stranger' teacher and rural student also complicate text selection. The text is in some senses a proxy for this relationship: at once a mediator of difference, bringing alterity closer (Parton, 2015), an essential touchstone in the teacher's own practice of identity maintenance (Spanke, 2015), a means of foreshortening the distance between teacher and student (Bishop, 2015; Ross, 2015; Norman, 2015), and a catalyst of conversations that allow insight into aspects of students' lives that would otherwise remain invisible (McPheeters-Neal, 2015).

All of these teachers are writing under the rubric of rural literacies, and each makes a concerted effort to attend to the specificity of rural place. And yet in their efforts to make learning relevant to their students, both texts and the concept of relevance play a significant role in managing the relationship between 'outsider' teachers and students. Conceptualised in terms of proximity, the role of the 'stranger' teacher appears to be to use the text to increase or decrease the distance between rural places and rural students. In all of the cases described above, the connections forged between place, student, teacher and text are indirect and nonlinear.

In the above instances, the relevance of the text is one way of managing the proximity of a range of relationships – between teacher and student, student and place, teacher and place, and student and the world beyond their local community. In the process of teaching texts as it is enacted by teachers in rural schools, 'place' exists relationally, between the locales of student and teacher. Furthermore, although it is certainly not the case that all rural English teachers are 'outsiders', it is possible that the exteriority of this position is in fact productive: 'through moments of miscommunication', Norman (2015) notes, 'also came communication' (p. 32).

How a given text represents rurality and calls forth particular subject positions illuminates the question of relevance from a different perspective. When a text is chosen due to its presumed relevance for students, is the act of self-recognition necessarily a positive one? When students connect to a given representation of rurality, what other identities are implied in this act of recognition? And if a student's connection to text originates in an act of recognition, where does the critical distance to view these representations *as* representations come from? Analysing the representation of rurality in a novel through the lens of proximity and distance therefore offers one way to answer the above questions, as well as a broader one: what are the potential implications of expecting rural students to identify with rural characters in a fictional text?

Imagining rurality in David Metzenthen's *Boys of blood and bone*

I ask the reader to imagine that they are a contemporary teacher, relatively new to the area, perhaps from an urban or suburban environment, facing a class of rural students. In this situation, if reading aloud, how might one approach the following lines of dialogue?

> 'Garage's up 'ere on the left. … You'll be right as rain with Goughie, even if he is a bit of a old stroppy bastard. And that old grey hole there is the pub … Which is where I guess you might be stayin', so I might see yer in there tonight, since I'll be comin' in with the missus. So that's Stratty, mate. Impressive, eh? Where you from?' (Metzenthen, 2003, p. 2)

Play up the Strine, or play it down? Adopt an

attitude of irony, seriousness, or a mix of both? In their reading, how should the teacher navigate this character who appears to traverse not just distance but also time, emerging directly out of a nostalgic vision of an Australian past?

In Units One and Two English, texts are selected by the school's English department; when I began teaching English in a rural town, this text had already been selected as the subject of an Anzac-themed unit in VCE English. Although the decision to teach Metzenthen's text was made before I began teaching, in discussion with my colleagues I learned that the familiarity of the setting was one reason for selecting the text: both its geographical location and the town's name, Strattford, suggest that Metzenthen is referring to Stratford – a small town in East Gippsland adjacent to the town in which my school was located – as does the reference to the McAlister River, actually the Macalister. The novel was also selected because its language was considered accessible, and for its thematic exploration of World War I and the need to continue and consolidate the school's ties to the local RSL, whose members visited and spoke to the students every year in advance of Anzac Day. Relevance is also a key thematic element of the text, as Metzenthen (2003) foregrounds the common challenges faced by his protagonists, such as the consequences of risk-taking behaviours, emotional maturity, and increasing independence from parental oversight. Indeed, according to Metzenthen, the writing of *Boys of blood and bone* only gained real momentum when he decided to explore the interplay between an Anzac soldier, Andy Lansell, and a contemporary character, Henry Lyon (Hamer, 2004). Throughout the novel, the parallel narratives of these two characters are employed to convey a sense of humanistic continuity: 'By using two narrative voices', states Metzenthen (2012), 'those of Henry and Andy, I wanted to get across the idea that people have not changed so much, although Australia, and the world has'. Above all, Metzenthen aims to bring young Australians into closer proximity with the Anzac legend. Through the contiguous narratives of Henry and Andy, Metzenthen emphasises the continuity between the Anzacs and 'us', and therefore foregrounds the relevance of the Anzac mythology to young Australians, who are implicitly urged to recognise and cultivate the values of courage, duty and humility that both Henry and Andy embody. However, the proximity between these two young men is maintained via the production and erasure of a third character, Trot, a young rural male whom Henry befriends. This character troubles the unity between Henry and Andy, and points to a deeper, twinned narrative of loss: of both a sense of place and an authentic national identity. This narrative of rupture and loss, I will suggest, disrupts the assumption that relevance naturally produces a positive and affirming act of recognition.

It is important to note that the structure and form of the text is, as Metzenthen states (2012), aligned to Andy and Henry. The novel opens with Metzenthen's third-person narration of Henry Lyon's story, which begins when Henry, having just finished school in Malvern, suffers from a car breakdown on a country road in Strattford on the way to the east coast for a surf trip with his friends. Here he is surprised to find himself immersed in the Avenue of Honour, 'look[ing] down where the bitumen met the gravel, seeing his sneakers but imagining their [the 'Anzacs', before they left Australia] boots on this track back then. The First World War' (Metzenthen, 2003, p. 2). That the past is alive in the present is a theme that is frequently reiterated in the text. However, this temporal contiguity ultimately comes at the expense of place. In this novel, it quickly becomes apparent that Henry's engagement with rurality is primarily an engagement with the past. This connection is prefigured in the novel's prologue, which envisions Henry on the Avenue of Honour in Strattford: 'If Henry Lyon was able to see back down the road for, say, eighty-five years rather than just a kilometre or so, he might've seen Andrew Lansell in person, rather than just a memorial elm tree with Andy's name on it' (Metzenthen, 2003, n.p.).

Here, the presence of the place itself – its actuality and specificity – is collapsed into the past. In doing so, the prologue inaugurates and enacts a movement that will function, repetitively and insistently, to distance the reader from a close engagement with the present-day setting. From the beginning of the novel to its end, Strattford is associated with the past: Henry notes its 'caught in time feeling' (Metzenthen, 2003, p. 11), feels that he can 'touch history' (p. 12), is 'immersed in the past' (p. 24) and thinks that 'out here, the past [does] not seem so far away' (p. 26). For Henry, the entry into Strattford initiates an intense imaginative engagement with history, through his effort to understand and mentally recreate Andy's own experience of war. Although this is an effort that never quite succeeds, it is a powerful source of value, longing, and meaning for Henry. Where Strattford is not engaged, via Henry's imagination, with its military history, it is merely

old – devoid of meaning. The town centre, for example, is marked only by its disconnection from this important commemorative function: 'The trees of the Avenue of Honour stopped obediently where the small town of Strattford started, which struck Henry as kind of sad' (Metzenthen, 2003, p. 5). Apart from the Avenue of Honour, each rural setting is connected to history only in a negative sense. For example, Trot's girlfriend Janine works at the historic Rosewood Hotel because, Henry imagines, 'you probably took whatever job came along' (Metzenthen, 2003, p. 56), an impression that is later confirmed by another character, who notes that '[t]he opportunities for a girl like her are severely limited in a backwater like this' (p. 157), and by Janine herself. The reader therefore engages with the present of this particular rural space in the thinnest possible terms, because when seen through Henry's eyes, the place itself is without presence, continuously deferred to an imaginary past. At any site of potential recognition, the text presents and simultaneously undermines the immediacy and the possibility of its presence for the reader who is a rural student.

Even if rural space is far more vividly – if rather romantically – conjured within Andy's narrative, it seems that this idyllic image of rural life is one that is inaccessible to Henry, or to Trot. In the contemporary setting, the loss of a sense of place is compensated for by Henry's physical, social and imaginative mobility. However, if Henry is defined by his mobility, Trot is defined by stasis: he is both confined to and synonymous with Strattford, apparently without the ambition to be anywhere else – although he never mentions having any particular affinity with the place. Rather, he is simply identical to it: his implied absence of a future, which mirrors the town's own, is made literal by his death in a car accident on a country road. Ultimately, Trot's life is marked by lack in a way that Henry's is not. It is implied that he is unemployed, and after Trot's funeral, a town elder remarks that his life was somewhat circumscribed: 'He was a boy who would've done better eighty-five years ago with something heroic to do' (Metzenthen, 2003, p. 195). Trot is never anything other than what he is, and in this way, he reflects the mythology of authentic rural character, yet in a way which renders him profoundly anachronistic.

It is troubling that Metzenthen (2003) explicitly links contemporary rurality with economic struggle, stasis and/or downward mobility. Place itself is devalued in the present, as the Australia signified by Henry is irreversibly marked by its transnationalism and rural identity is consigned to the past. For a rural student reading this text and connecting to its familiar places, there is only a recurrent narrative of loss. At the points when these students are invited to draw closer to the text – to engage in a proximate relationship with it – such as when the rural settings are described, it only becomes more distant, because the rural has been consigned to an idyllic and idealised past.

The novel therefore exemplifies the need to understand 'proximate relationships' (McLean Davies, 2012, p. 15) when teaching works of Australian literature, both in the way it draws upon a particular set of national tropes and in the somewhat troubling, but telling, way that it marks its relevance for a contemporary audience. For Metzenthen (2003), rurality is of value insofar as it is unchanging; its natural settings offer only the stasis that enables Henry's encounter with the past. So although the text bears superficial points of relevance for rural students, it embodies many representations of rurality that are problematic for them. It is of course always possible to undertake resistant readings of a text, and to explore how a given reader is positioned by a text. However, if 'relevance' implies the forging of meaningful and affective connections to a text, one wonders about the affective and cognitive experience for a rural student who recognises the rural aspect of themselves represented in *Boys of blood and bone*. The obvious point is that relevance, as it is enacted within the process of selecting texts, should not be understood as a simple correspondence or 'matching' between the setting of the text and the setting of students' lives. It is more appropriate to consider text selection in terms of a set of proximate relationships, for while a text's setting may bear physical proximity to students' own, the text itself – at least in this case – functions to distance students from the possibilities of the place in which they live.

As the accounts in *Literacy teaching in rural communities* suggest, there is also another proximate relationship to be considered here: that of student and (outsider) teacher. At the time of teaching, I was merely astonished by my students' willingness to embrace this text, which was unexpected not for the reasons I have outlined above, but because of what I considered the text's unwieldiness in terms of style, length and structure. If I were to teach this text now, I would perhaps use it to prompt a more critical reflection on rural identity both for myself and for the students. More than this,

however, I would like to understand why, precisely, the students engaged with it and what aspects of the text they connected with: was it the landscape, the war narrative, or perhaps Trot's circumscribed situation that spoke most directly to them? And if they did feel proximity to Trot – with his love of fast cars and footy, his casual misogyny – is this identification, of necessity, at the expense of place? After all, Trot, like the town, survives as a relic of an Australian past. Did they recognise the (non-)spaces of contemporary rural Australia in this text, and if not, how else could they describe or re-place them? In other words, I was unaware, at the time, of the productivity of the essential spatiality of the relationship between student, (outsider) teacher and text – precisely the set of relations that the rural literacies work urges us to consider.

Bacalja and Bliss's recent (2019) analysis of trends in the VCE text list between 2010 and 2019 poses similar, if more sizeable, questions. Addressing the ratio of rural to urban or suburban settings in the texts prescribed in this period, the authors observe that although there are fewer texts set in rural areas (55%) than urban ones (84%), the number of texts set in rural locales is still disproportionately high given the number of students who reside in rural areas. At the conclusion to this section of their analysis the authors pose two further questions: 'Should students study texts set in locations that are familiar to them' and 'What place do stories around rural Australia have in the English curriculum?' (Bacalja & Bliss, 2019, p. 24).

The foregoing analysis indicates that we should question the inherent value of texts 'set in locations that are familiar' to students on the basis of that familiarity alone. As Bacalja and Bliss (2019) suggest, the rural idyll remains central to the Australian psyche. I have attempted to unpack the way in which the maintenance of this ideal distances students from the reality of the places in which they live. However, considered in light of my analysis, the second question opens up a range of others. How does the relationship between the setting of the text, the locale of the student and the position of the teacher in the community affect the role of texts about rural Australia in the curriculum? Can responding with critical distance to representations of rural Australia in fact bring students – rural or otherwise – closer to rural places and spaces?

If I have advocated for the specificity of the relationship between teacher, class and text, as well as for attention to the particularity of the structure and features of the text itself, this is also because ten years of English teaching have taught me that this profession, as it is enacted each year with a new cohort of students, is inherently uncertain. For Dixon (1967) and his peers, authentic textual engagement begins with a spontaneous act of recognition, and always occurs in the affective mode. In this case, adopting a critical stance on the text seems to deny the validity and authenticity of the student's experience. The alternative, of course, is that this act of recognition does not take place, in which case the student experiences the text as inauthentic or merely irrelevant. Thus far, however, I can only speak to my own experience about what it might be like for a student to read a text that they are expected to identify with, or what happens when particular texts are introduced into a rural English classroom.

Although the students responded positively the first year that I taught *Boys of blood and bone*, their response the following year was far less enthusiastic. The subsequent years have only underlined the profound unpredictability of how, and whether, a group of students will connect with a text: of what will prompt an act of recognition or draw a student proximate to a text, in either a 'first encounter' or when engaging in a 'close encounter' (Green, 2023, p. 63). (Recently, I taught a class of students who responded with awe, excitement and insight to a dystopian text that was set, of course, in a vastly distant spatial and temporal setting; the following year, the text failed to arouse any interest whatsoever). Thus, although I have made the case for a closer engagement between the field of rural literacies and scholarship in subject English, future research in rural English classrooms that makes use of alternative qualitative methods would be invaluable when considering the question of cultural relevance and rurality. In my view, ethnographic research or interviews with rural students as they encounter texts that are both 'close' and 'distant' would enable researchers to formulate a picture of relevance and text selection that possesses greater clarity, depth and breadth than is currently possible. At the same time, it is important that scholars of subject English continue to make the effort to understand how literary texts might articulate the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of students.

Currently, text selection is, as McLean Davies (2012) asserts, premised upon both 'ideological' and 'pragmatic' factors. However, as Teese (2011, 2013) demonstrates, the ideological and pragmatic dimensions of subject English are inextricable from

one another. It is my view that a closer, and ongoing, engagement between the fields of rural literacies and scholarship in subject English, which accounts for both the specificity of rurality and the historical and cultural specificity of subject English, would enrich the research undertaken within both these fields.

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Teaching Writing in the NAPLAN Era in Regional and Remote Schools: A Rural Report

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Abstract: This paper delves into the pedagogical repercussions of the first decade of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) for rural English teachers. it revisits survey data from a broader study on NAPLAN's influence on writing pedagogies in secondary English to reanalyse the experiences of teachers in remote and regional settings in Queensland and Tasmania. Given ongoing concerns about rural education, it is unclear whether, or if, NAPLAN has brought benefits to teachers and students beyond metropolitan areas. While NAPLAN may reinforce some deficit perspectives of rural students, it also collides with ongoing issues facing rural schools, including teachers who are teaching out of their specialist subjects. Broadly, English teachers in rural Australia tend to be sceptical about the value of NAPLAN, and it has increased the responsibilities of English teachers relative to their peers. Nonetheless, despite NAPLAN, rural English teachers are finding ways to open up curriculum possibilities in Australian schools.

Keywords: writing pedagogies, NAPLAN, rural education, writing assessment, specialist teachers

Introduction

In my research on the pedagogical impacts of the first NAPLAN decade with English teachers in two states (Gannon, 2019, 2020; Gannon & Dove, 2021), teachers from rural Australia formed a substantial cohort within the larger study. Repeatedly, in educational research, rurality is identified as a key determinant of disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes in Australian schooling systems. I thus revisit the data from my NAPLAN study to explore the particular experiences and reports of teachers who do their work away from major urban centres. I am interested in whether and how NAPLAN has impacted differently on their teaching, on their students, and on planning and pedagogical decision-making within their schools about how they approach, in particular, the teaching of writing. In this paper, I aim to follow the main highway, but also – in keeping with my rural habits and early training – some more circuitous back roads to add complexity and context to the discussion about NAPLAN in its present form.

Rurality is a somewhat subjective and widely variable experience. It is a marker of disadvantage in Australian statistical reporting in areas such as health care, longevity, educational attainment, income, access to job opportunities and vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. However, people living in rural areas may also experience a greater sense of social and community cohesion, lower costs of living and fewer stressors, and may have more direct access to nature. Experiences of rurality vary enormously from place to place and from person to person, and – as everywhere – can change in an instant, for example after flood or fire. It is crucial to stress at the start that I do not see rurality as being inherently attached to deficit. My own experiences as a child, student, teacher, and resident of rural and regional communities across multiple states and throughout my life inevitably shape this position.

Rural education scholarship tends to problematise the category of rurality. Corbett (2015) describes it as 'deeply problematic and essentially indefinable' (p. 124). As a demographic indicator it relies upon crude measures of density and distance, whereas in fact it is more fitting to acknowledge the uniqueness of rural places: 'each rural place is its own place, and it is precisely this sense of place that marks out a lived sense of rurality' (Corbett, 2015, p. 124). Similarly Green and Reid (2021) describe 'rural social space' as 'richly complex and contradictory – different in almost every location' (p. 32). Roberts and Fuqua (2021) describe 'rural' as a 'catchall' term for all places beyond the metropolis, with the intent of research in rural education being to work 'against the essentialisation of "place" and standardisation' (p. 2). Both rurality and remoteness are settler-colonial constructions and discursive products of modernity, and those who are positioned in the peripheries are overlooked, omitted, homogenised and erased – except when they are perceived as problems. In my research on the effects of NAPLAN, rurality was not initially a focus, and given my interest in standardised testing and broad patterns of response, my findings suffer from some of the inherent flaws that misrepresent or homogenise rural and remote experiences, particularly in survey-based research that anonymises place beyond the broadest of descriptors. With that caveat, and impelled by the intention to amplify the voices of non-urban teachers, this paper revisits my original NAPLAN study. It draws some provisional comparisons between rural and urban teachers, and reports in greater depth what non-urban teachers in the study said about writing pedagogies in their schools and the impacts of NAPLAN.

My research, *Teaching writing in the NAPLAN era* (Gannon, 2020), aimed to gauge the impacts of the first decade of NAPLAN on the teaching of writing in secondary English classrooms. In the first phase of the study, in late 2018, I undertook a survey of secondary English teachers in two Australian states (Gannon, 2019), while in the second phase I developed case studies at a distance on four sites (Gannon & Dove, 2021). As well as their experiences of NAPLAN in their schools, participants in the study reported on their own writing practices, their knowledge and beliefs about writing, their professional networks and training related to writing, and how they taught writing within a selected class and unit of work. This paper concentrates on what teachers said in the survey phase about their experiences of NAPLAN, and the extent to which NAPLAN results may have been reshaping their work. Invitations to participate were distributed via state English teacher associations (i.e., the English Teachers Association of Queensland and Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English). The total number of eligible survey participants who were teaching secondary English at the time of the survey was 181, with around 70% in Queensland and around 30% in Tasmania, reflecting the relative size of the profession in each state. Of the total participants in this study, 74 – or 41% of total participants – located themselves outside urban areas. These teachers worked in schools across state, Catholic and Independent sectors, encompassing schools with very low (<600) and higher than average (>1200) measures of socioeconomic advantage,[1] and ranging in size from fewer than 100 students to more than 2000. Revisiting this data set is an opportunity to dive into their experiences of NAPLAN effects through the particular lens of rurality.

In Australia, 'metrocentric' policy-making (Dove, 2022) tends to disregard rural schools and educators, and predominantly metropolitan-based researchers may have less knowledge and understanding of their experiences. Although I now count myself within this latter group, and work at a metropolitan university, my interest in rurality is grounded in my own peripatetic educational experience. Initially as a rural kindergarten and primary school student in Gippsland and a senior secondary student on the fringe of the Mallee region of Victoria, later as a remote student in postgraduate teacher education and then a teacher in Western Australia's Kimberley, I later worked in a regional city in Far North Queensland, including several years as an English curriculum adviser spanning a region ranging from south of Cairns to the Torres Strait. If not for further postgraduate studies leading to a PhD and my subsequent employment at an urban university, I would likely still be among those rural English teachers and those working with them, through the NAPLAN decade and beyond. The invitation to reconsider rurality in my data set for this special issue was therefore both welcome and aligned with my deep-seated empathy for rural educators, and my awareness of particular equity dimensions that impact on their work. Beyond my personal interests, rural education and its discrepancies in outcomes have been of concern on a wider scale for many years.[2]

In my study, teachers designated their schools as 'urban', 'regional' or 'remote'. In each state and

jurisdiction, these categories have multilayered unique geographic and demographic challenges related to population density/scarcity, proximity/distance, differing access to services and facilities, and widely differing terrains. As I have noted, rurality itself is a widely contested concept. However, standardised measures are deployed by governments and other institutions. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021)[3] defines the location of schools using five gradations: major city, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote. Broadly, remote areas are more likely to have central schools that combine primary and secondary year levels, or to terminate before Year 12, requiring students to travel further to complete their schooling. These factors can exacerbate all the complexities experienced by students and teachers in remote areas. In contrast, many regional areas have substantial populations and services. Each rural place has its own unique complications and affordances, and the design of my study did not enable me to capture this uniqueness. Nevertheless, of the participants in this study, 73 – or 41% – located themselves outside urban areas. Of this cohort, 68 (or 93%) were in regional areas, with a much smaller cohort of 5 (7%) in remote areas of their states. In the next section, I will begin by looking briefly at this small cohort of remote secondary English teachers, impelled by the awareness that they are most likely to have their experiences swamped and their voices silenced.

Remote teaching in the NAPLAN era

The experience of remoteness is vastly different in one of our largest states and one of our smallest, and even within a state, each remote place is unique in the configuration of factors that produce it as remote. In this study, four of the remote teachers were located in Queensland, and one was in Tasmania. All of these teachers were women and all five worked at state schools. Their secondary schools were small: two teachers worked in schools with fewer than 100 students, two were in schools with fewer than 500 students, and one was in a school with between 500 and 1000. The ICSEA values of their schools were lower than average for Australian schools, with one between 700 and 799 and one between 800 and 899, and three between 900 and 999. These characteristics are consistent with what we already know about rural education (CESE, 2013; Corbett, 2015; Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022; Halsey, 2018; HREOC, 2000). Opportunities are fewer and curriculum breadth is generally narrower in smaller schools, and access is further restricted in less economically privileged families and communities.

In order to examine the experiences of the remote teachers, I extracted from the Qualtrics survey software the data of teachers who had selected 'remote' for the location of their school. Although not statistically reliable or generalisable, this did allow me to isolate their responses and identify patterns and features that may be distinct to their experiences of remoteness. These rural/remote teachers were very experienced, with all five being aged 40–59. Four were permanently employed while one was on a >six-month contract. Three had worked for between 21 and 40 years as English teachers, one for 11 to 15 years, and one for 6 to 10 years. Four of them had had considerable teaching careers prior to the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008, and their responses were likely shaped by their knowledge of teaching in a pre-NAPLAN era. Consistent with the larger study, all of these teachers said they had learned 'nothing' or 'very little' about teaching writing during their teacher training, although two mentioned learning about teaching reading.

I was interested in the intricacies of teachers' writing dispositions and pedagogies, so some of the questions addressed writing broadly, beyond NAPLAN. Four of the participants listed many writing practices both outside and inside school, though one did no writing away from school. In order of prominence, these included academic writing (theses, assignments, etc.), journals, blogs, fiction and poetry. Inside school, all of them wrote materials for their English classes, including model texts, lesson plans, unit outlines, assessment tasks, etc.; four of them also wrote School Management Plans, Annual School Plans, School Evaluations, and grant applications and acquittals, suggesting their seniority within the school. While two of the teachers had not published their writing, three had published in online blogs (2), literary journals (1), professional magazines (1) and academic journals (2). One teacher had undertaken independent research on the teaching of writing in her role as a Master Teacher and was leading a writing project across all KLAs that had won a state-wide award for excellence. This is a timely reminder that exemplary work is possible *despite* geographic isolation.

What did these five remote teachers say about NAPLAN in their schools?

Consistent with the broader cohort, these teachers did

not find NAPLAN data to be of much use in guiding their teaching of writing relative to the more valuable information they acquired from discussions with students about their writing, their summative writing assignments, and non-assessed writing. Yet NAPLAN has had powerful impacts and effects, and provoked contention within their schools. The teachers were asked to describe NAPLAN results and implications and then provide explanations for those responses. Two teachers had seen improved results in Year 9 at their school, while two saw flatline results and one had seen results deteriorate. In two of the schools, writing results in Year 9 were below the state and national averages, through only one school was also below the average of 'similar' schools.

It must be noted that 'similar' has been a contested category through NAPLAN's history; however, the apparatus of comparison that is at the heart of NAPLAN requires the production of such categories. Ideally, it enables trends and gaps to be identified so that resourcing can be deployed to enhance equity and large scales and within schools. In those remote schools where improvements were evident, and where results were above those of the state in writing, they were explained in terms of interventions. One teacher ascribed the better results to '*the very specific, targeted program of teaching writing across all subject areas*' that the school had developed and implemented. The focus was on teacher professional learning, which aimed to increase '*confidence and capacity to teach writing effectively using consistent evidence-informed strategies*' of teachers in all year levels and KLAS. Results were also explained in terms of student cohorts. In the school where poorer results were apparent, the teacher explained them as due to the '*apathy and lack of interest*' of individual students on the day. Importantly, one teacher described results in terms of their student cohort with a more optimistic and persistent commitment to change: '*We have a high indigenous* [sic] *population – English is a second language for many of these students yet we are closing the gap in their Year 9 NAPLAN results*'. Though comparisons may point to outcome gaps, there is a sense of steady progress due to teachers' efforts to meet student needs.

Preparation for NAPLAN varies widely across schools. Three teachers stated that their remote schools did not prepare students overtly for NAPLAN. Their English classrooms were characteristically busy spaces, with a wide range of non-assessable low-stakes writing activities embedded in their daily practices, including summarising, developing notes from group discussions and working on drafts in class. None of these teachers identified filling in worksheets as a frequent practice, and only one had students copying notes from the board. Yet covert preparation for NAPLAN is one of the practices necessary in designing responsible English programs in the present. Regarding a persuasive writing task that was part of a Year 9 English unit, the teacher noted that it

> *was deliberately designed to look like the NAPLAN task, but we never said to students it was preparation for NAPLAN. Its real-world application was around the value of being able to express a point of view in an effective and cohesive way.*

Crucially, for this teacher, NAPLAN was acknowledged and must be prepared for but not allowed to hijack discourse or practices pertaining to what matters most in English. In response to a question about NAPLAN preparation, the teacher elaborated:

> *BLEEERRGGHHHH – We have had a lot of fights about this. While we did design some tasks to look like the NAPLAN writing, it did not dictate the focus or the criteria we used. What we aimed for was the transfer of a writing process, not a set of strategies or formulas students would apply on the day.*

In one school, a practice of rapid writing and review had been adopted:

> *We had a 5–5–5 writing cycle … Five minutes of planning, five minutes of writing, five minutes of returning and reflecting on their work with the intent to make changes. These were staged and scheduled regularly in the unit. Students shared their own work with a peer and provided feedback.*

While not pitched as a NAPLAN test preparation strategy, this would be beneficial in preparing students for timed writing under pressure – but more importantly, it explicitly teaches metacognitive strategies that are important for successful writers. Students move beyond thinking that a first draft is good enough, and learn that quality writing emerges through an iterative process.

Teachers were also asked to list the 'metalanguage' they had used with students in a recent unit of work. Their responses included, but far exceeded, the limited repertoire of the NAPLAN rubric. In a Year 8 unit called 'You Better Watch Out!', focused on a Kipling short story and a range of other texts, the teacher said that

> *students' writing had two functions. One was to have a persuasive response to the reading position of the story, while the second was to attend to the language features in the story to represent particular ideas and values about what it means to be a hero.*

Accordingly, metalanguage included: '*Vocative, Anthropomorphism, Reading position, Influences, Readers, Foregrounds, Silences or ignores, Invites, Supports, Language of judgement*'. Throughout the unit, they '*focussed on deliberate and staged writing consolidation activities, where students rehearsed steps in constructing their thinking and writing. They would plan out a response, write it then return to deliberately edit their response for clarity and cohesion*'. In their assessment task

> *Students wrote a persuasive response relating to the way readers were invited to make sense of the focus story. They had a stimulus sheet, with prompts. So they had to use both their knowledge and understanding of the story, but also take up a critical position in response to the message of the story. They then had to plan how they would support their reaction to the story with a series of considered explanations and examples.*

Given that persuasive writing is a NAPLAN-preferred genre, these students are learning far more about language and engaging with texts through critical thinking and writing about texts than through a more reductive approach to NAPLAN preparation, as some of the teachers in the larger study (Gannon 2019, 2020) reported.

This descriptive account of these five very experienced English teachers working in remote schools does not provide generalisable insights into the experiences of remote teachers. As senior figures in their schools, and mostly stable in their employment, they were well positioned to be pedagogical leaders. This means that they were able to lead change and push against the more deleterious effects of NAPLAN where they could. As one of these participants noted when reflecting on other factors impacting on the teaching of English in their school, '*the leadership position of the principal … could have a significant impact on the PD or focus of the school and the approach to literacy, English and NAPLAN*'. At best, despite their geographic isolation, these teachers were well-networked influencers within their schools, and active contributors to and participants in their professional associations. Much of the wider debate about rural and remote schooling mentions the difficulties of attracting and retaining experienced teachers away from urban centres; however, these teachers are reminders that remote and disadvantaged schools also have highly experienced English teachers and leaders who can mobilise resources and opportunities to educate their students and other staff, who may be less experienced, in a professional learning community focused on writing improvement. Here NAPLAN becomes just one data source within a much richer ecology of evidence about students' development as writers.

Rural teaching in the NAPLAN era

After my forensic examination of the remote teachers in the previous section, I turn here to the regional teachers. In this section, all comparisons are between the regional (non-remote) teachers and urban teachers. These teachers were located in towns and regional cities that are larger and more likely to have access to resources and facilities that schools can draw upon. Some of these have tertiary opportunities locally available, including TAFE colleges and regional universities, and a range of cultural institutions. Local employment opportunities are likely be greater. Students and teachers are less likely to feel the pressures of geographic isolation. Of the regional cohort, 74% were in Queensland and 27% in Tasmania; 91% were women. Their schools skewed slightly towards non-government sectors compared to the full cohort for the study: 54% worked in government schools (69% in urban schools), 24% in Catholic schools (16% in urban schools), and 22% in Independent schools (15% in urban schools). Their schools tend to be smaller than urban schools, with 28% having 100–499 students and 34% 500–999 students. The ICSEA values of their schools tended to converge around the average bands, with 34% at 900–999 and 46% at 1000–1099. In contrast to urban schools, where more than 18% were economically privileged (>1100 ICSEA), only 1% of the regional schools had a high degree of privilege. In contrast to the highly experienced and very small remote cohort, these teachers also had a broader spread of experience, with the largest percentage of 22% having taught for 3–5 years, while the next largest grouping of 20% had been teaching for 11–15 years and 18% for 21–30 years. In contrast, urban schools seemed to have slightly less experience overall: 70% of regional teachers had begun teaching before NAPLAN compared with 60% of urban teachers. The largest percentage of 24% in urban schools had taught for 6–10 years, with 14% having taught for 3–5 years and 16% for 11–15 years, and 16% for 16–20 years. In regional schools, 90% of these teachers were permanent in their workplaces, slightly higher than the urban cohort of 84%.

The regional teachers provided widely varied detail about units of work they had taught, although space does not allow me to discuss these here. However, an interesting difference is that regional teachers were more likely (47%) than urban teachers (31%)

to identify real-life audiences beyond the teacher for student writing. The audiences in regional schools included: a public school display of a completed book project; a display for parents in a cross-KLA Showcase afternoon; a slam poetry event; an online school magazine; and stories written for Year 5/6 students. Regional teachers broadly indicated a greater propensity (16%) to seek audiences for student writing beyond the school than urban teachers (8%), and were also more likely (33%) to encourage their students to enter their writing in competitions than urban teachers (24%). Further, regional teachers were more likely (44%) to engage with external organisations that focused on writing than their urban peers (32%). They had higher engagement with writers festivals (28% vs 16%), and arts organisations, including Poetry in Action and Red Room Poetry Company (30% vs 28%).

What did regional teachers say about NAPLAN and their schools?

The regional teachers observed different trends in their schools' Year 9 results than those in the urban schools. In the regions, a much larger proportion of schools (47%) saw their NAPLAN results flatline, 28% saw an increase and 26% saw a decrease. In the urban schools, larger proportions of schools saw improvements (39%) and decreases (37%) in results, while 25% saw results flatline. Regional teachers provided a wide range of explanations for trends in the results. For some teachers, improved results were explained as due to '*high socioeconomic status*' or '*small classes*'. More complex justifications pointed to strategic decisions about resourcing: '*With the use of the Collins Writing programme we are slowly seeing an improvement in kids' writing*'. Significant curriculum reorganisation had also contributed:

> *The school moved to providing English classes (as opposed to Humanities integration) which has allowed a little more time for teaching specific English – writing – skills. Also the school has employed a teacher librarian and the benefits of this reading and writing focus is beginning to be seen. Co-curricular writing opportunities are being increased.*

Another school with improved results strategically deployed a NAPLAN marker where they would be most impactful: '*two (Year 8) classes taught by an experienced NAPLAN marker*', with the teacher '*[weaving] aspects of NAPLAN into every lesson*'.

Flat results were due to strategic decisions about the dubious educational value and impacts of NAPLAN in contrast to things that mattered more. For example, one teacher seems to resist the dumbing-down of writing that NAPLAN promotes:

> *NAPLAN assesses writing in a way that is formulaic and emphasises particular skills (some of which I feel are less important than the NAPLAN rubric suggests). The strange requirements around vocabulary (for example) can make for writing that isn't actually terribly effective.*

A teacher in another school reinforced this view of NAPLAN as destructive for English teaching and learning: '*NAPLAN and the preparation put into it decreases students' love of writing and undermines what is important*'. Another explained flat results in terms of broader resistance across their school: '*We don't do targeted NAPLAN preparation, preferring not to lose class time to it. Therefore our students aren't necessarily taught how to take the test, which may affect their ability to jump through the necessary hoops*'. NAPLAN preparation is seen as antithetical to learning – not worth the loss of time. Furthermore, another teacher explains, too much support for students' literacy development reduces their autonomy and confidence: '*Students are being scaffolded more and are not able to write without scaffolding*'.

In those schools where results had decreased, students were often blamed: '*Weak Year 9 cohort and lack of student engagement. Multiple students either refused to write in NAPLAN, or wrote very little (only a sentence or paragraph)*'. A more elaborate explanation pointed to tensions between a direct response to NAPLAN and the teacher's commitment to more complex richer textual experiences in English: '*I believe there is also a need to engage the students with explicit reading instruction/comprehension of high-quality texts and then engage with high-quality teaching of writing*'. Another teacher elaborated on the weak literacy culture in their school and community:

> *Students are frequently reluctant to write. Many say that it hurts their hands. Lack of a reading culture among many students means that their language base is often deficient which is reflected in their language choices in writing which is often very basic.*

A mismatch between students and the test was also evident in one teacher's response:

> *I believe that the 2018 stimulus (speculating about future technology) was very challenging for students like ours, most of whom are from remote Indigenous communities, and do not have the cultural knowledge to explore relevant ideas.*

It seems reasonable to conclude that these regional teachers were sceptical about the quality, value and usefulness of NAPLAN testing for their students.

Despite their comments, the regional teachers, much like the urban cohort, set practice NAPLAN tests in class time (28%) as their main NAPLAN preparation strategy. The second most popular strategy was a whole-school focus (20%), followed by redesigned English programs (16%). In the urban cohort, 27% used practice tests in class, but other strategies were reversed, with 20% redesigning English programs and only 9% adopting a whole-school focus. Redesigning an English program in a regional school could mean reorganising scope and sequence: *'each grade 3/5/7/9 (this is a district school) have on their curriculum maps to begin the year with English units on narratives and persuasive texts, so they are familiar to students by May'*. A teacher in another regional school acknowledged that *'students with low IQ or anxiety about testing are withdrawn from the testing'*. Although whole-school responses were mentioned by teachers, they were sometimes sceptical about their school's commitment in practice: *'Say that it is whole school responsibility but in reality falls to English to prepare and then take responsibility for results'*. In regional schools, English teachers felt that the consequences of NAPLAN were greater for them (67%) than for their peers (compared to 60% in urban schools): *'It is the responsibility of English teachers to prepare/teach the literacy tests! … Other faculties do nothing! As a Year 7 or 9 English teacher you have more stress and more work'*. The pressure is disproportionate, and this can be frustrating for English teachers: *'We carry the load. There are many, many teachers on staff here that would never have seen a NAPLAN test'*. Even where a whole-school plan has been developed, English teachers retain responsibility for it: *'There has frequently been a whole-school approach to literacy initiatives, but often the majority of curriculum time for literacy development is spent in English'*. In one school, effort had been put into improving numeracy but equivalent investments in literacy were not apparent:

> *Head of Maths and Science department was employed to resurrect the poor numeracy results. Perception that literary skills are taught in primary school and then we do not have to teach the students these skills in Year 7 and 9. NAPLAN is considered an English teacher issue rather than a whole-school issue – staff from other departments are not advised to encourage students to learn about text types, text specific language etc in Science classes or Health classes or in electives like Art or Textiles.*

This comment implies, but does not address, the gap in professional learning about writing pedagogies of teachers in other KLAs. While teachers might be 'advised' to specifically teach writing in their subjects, they may not have the knowledge to do so effectively. In contrast, the remote school that implemented a whole-school professional learning program around writing is likely to produce teachers better equipped for this task and more positively oriented to this important task. As many of these English teachers stressed, writing is not important merely for NAPLAN but for the rest of one's life, future studies and employment, and engagement and enjoyment as a citizen in a sophisticated, literate culture.

The NAPLAN survey concluded by asking teachers to reflect on any factors impacting on writing in their state or their school which had not already been addressed. Several regional teachers mentioned issues that are endemic to rural educational provision. Although participants' responses indicate that experienced teachers are everywhere, lack of access to specialist teachers is an ongoing issue. One teacher noted that

> *We struggle to have expert English teachers in the secondary area. In many regional areas, English is taught by Phys Ed trained teachers, or other out of area teachers. This means they often lack the background knowledge or pedagogy or passion for reading and writing.*

In another school, this lack of expertise extended to leadership: *'Jnr Sec model that is not in the hands of curriculum HoDs and where Years 7&8 in particular can have non-English specialists taking classes. Students can be in Year 9 before engaging with an English specialist'*. Another teacher reflected on the inadequacies of training, knowledge, and disposition towards teaching writing among their colleagues:

> *Some graduates from college with an education management degree have not had any training in English for three years prior to teaching. I have met teachers who do not know their grammar or can't explain why the sentence does not work for the audience or purpose … Unfortunately, English teachers are too like copy editors and less like true writers. We can hinder good writing by being too caught up in the mechanics of writing. Some schools are too assessment driven including pre and post testing which leaves little room for fun and writing for enjoyment.*

Many assumptions about what is important and worthwhile in English are embedded in the comment above. These include notions of 'true writers' – what they are, who they are, what romantic notions of creativity are part of the legacy, and English teachers' love for their subject – and an implication that learning to write should incorporate opportunities for fun and enjoyment, which are being diminished by the fetish for evidence and consequent over-assessment.

Conclusion

In my research, I have approached NAPLAN as an instance of policy steering at a distance, where the centralised imposition of testing regimes impacts on all dimensions of work in schools, and at the most intimate levels. This study of secondary English teachers' perspectives on the first decade of NAPLAN and the teaching of writing was skewed towards members of the English Teachers Association, and therefore towards specialist English teachers. I revisited data from my 2018 survey in order to examine the experiences and perspectives of teachers working in the widely diverse rural and remote locations in the two states of my study. While their views were relatively consistent with the views of their peers in urban areas, there are some variations, and their often overlooked voices have gained more prominence. I have quoted comprehensively from the open text responses where they provided detailed and thoughtful responses to my questions, choosing not to truncate or further diminish their substantial and considered contributions to the research.

How the standardised testing regime that we have come to know in the form of NAPLAN emerged, needs to be better understood, as do its implications (Reid, 2017; Simpson Reeves, Exley & Dillon-Wallace, 2018). Given the paucity of statistical data in this regard, it is reasonable that we should have consistent national data sources that enable us to track student learning outcomes. However, we must ask whether NAPLAN continues to be the most effective or suitable means of doing this. Importantly, the earliest insights from research in the area (Masters & Forster, 1997) suggested that such national testing could be incorporated into regimes where teacher professional knowledge and practice is highly valued and where engagement in testing has potential to be richly professionally rewarding. This is not how NAPLAN has been taken up in Australia, and the English teachers cited in this paper tended to feel excluded or diminished as professionals by NAPLAN effects. As Wyatt-Smith and Jackson (2016) have pointed out, 'the equity purpose, and indeed, the learning and teaching purposes, have become subsumed by and made subservient to testing for accountability reporting as the primary goal in and of itself' (p. 241). Other inadvertent uses of NAPLAN data have also emerged as some schools self-promote in the highly competitive market for enrolments, and corporations and edu-businesses sell their services (Hogan, 2016). ACARA's response is limited to tinkering at the edges, while more profound and challenging questions continue to be asked by scholars, principals, teachers, parents and young people themselves. In terms of rural education, the original national inquiry conducted by HREOC was impelled by equity and human rights concerns about rural education. Yet in my research, NAPLAN appears to have become a lever to exacerbate inequity, rather than to overcome it.

Notes

1 Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students, incorporating parental occupation, education and geographical location, and proportion of Indigenous students in the school.

2 There have been two dedicated national studies into rural and remote education in Australia, approximately two decades apart: the Rural and remote education inquiry (DETYA, 1999), undertaken by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), and the Independent review into regional, rural and remote education (Halsey, 2018), conducted for the Department of Education and Training in 2017–18. Neither highlights literacy.

3 Using standardised measures of the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) used for all government reporting, including the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA) annual reporting of NAPLAN results.

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Firefly Intensities

Firefly Intensities: Writing alongside English Secondary Students in Rural Schools

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Abstract: The voices of students are largely absent in literature about writing pedagogy (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; DeJaynes et al., 2020). The limited presence of their voices in educational research and stories about the places they inhabit are paralleled by the invisibility of their contexts in standardised testing analysis. In understandings about rural and remote places, terms like 'remote' are used uncritically, and rural students are uncritically labelled both according to their distance from metropolitan centres, and as disadvantaged because of that distance. Rural students lack the opportunity to speak back to existing measures of writing outcomes, particularly those related to context, and might welcome the opportunity to comment on how they are depicted, defined and designated as 'disadvantaged' (Corbett & Green, 2013; Halsey, 2018; Reid, 2020). The NSW English Syllabus reminds teachers that 'language shapes our understanding of ourselves and our world' (NESA, 2017, p. 10), and while stories of experience and place are valuable in the pursuit of this understanding, opportunities for young people to tell these stories to authentic audiences are few. In attempting to represent regional, rural and remote students as disadvantaged, standardised measures ignore their experiences – experiences that I attempted to understand through the collection of student writing artefacts and interviews. This paper explores the stories of two young people from a small rural town who participated in a year-long writing project and subsequent research interviews about their experiences living and writing in remote NSW and their aspirations for elsewhere and otherwise, beyond (town) limits, stereotypes and deficit discourse.

Keywords: English teaching, rural education, creative writing

Introduction: Teaching English in country schools

English teaching in country schools is experienced in place – in spaces characterised by the qualities of air and dirt, the particular presence of trees and animals, the distances between here and there. I taught in a 'remote' central school where water was poured onto the red ground to raise green, green grass. Unexpected pelicans circled over the school oval after taking off from a nearby dam. In between these watery spaces, dust built up and burrs dried to hard spikes that could stab your foot through your shoe. Such typical rural scenes assume the simplicity of romantic outback myths of resilience and mateship or alternative associations with isolation, harsh landscapes and poverty (Green & Reid, 2014; Roberts & Green, 2013). Despite Australia's high levels of urbanisation, 'common perceptions of Australia as a "wide brown land" that privileges its inland heart' (Green & Reid, 2014, p. 1) persist, and rural students are subject to simplified perceptions of outback or rural inhabitants. In understandings about regional, rural and remote places, terms like 'remote' are used uncritically, and rural students are uncritically labelled both according to their distance from metropolitan centres, and as disadvantaged because of that distance.

Standardised testing contributes to this deficit discourse. Students of English are required to 'use language to shape and make meaning according to purpose, audience and context' and to 'express themselves and their relationship with others and their world' (NESA,

2017, p. 16) while operating in a field of practice that is frequently decontextualised, individualistic and subject to datafication and standardisation (Dove, 2018, 2012). The NSW English Syllabus tells teachers that 'language shapes our understanding of ourselves and our world' (NESA, 2017, p. 10), and while stories of experience and place are valuable in the pursuit of this understanding, opportunities for young people to tell these stories to authentic audiences are few.

Third space provides an in-between space where fixed ideas are interrogated, meaning is negotiated, and identities are constantly becoming. I take up the concept of third space to consider how writing itself can offer, or can open up, spaces for experiencing moments of 'emergence as the others of our selves' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). For my students and me, our efforts to articulate and perform pieces of writing as place (Dove, 2022) required the negotiation of spatio-temporal boundaries and the materiality of pages or screens. But these are what we have. Writing is the thing, after all, in our everyday work. And so, we found ourselves in a kind of writerly borderland – using Anzaldúa's (1987) broad conception of a borderland as 'a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary … in a constant state of transition' (p. 3) – grappling with those boundaries, with writing as constant movement (Dove, 2022).

Anzaldúa (1987) describes her experience of writing as movement, as a 'squirming' or a 'boundless, floating limbo' (p. 72) that is familiar to my students and me. They tell me that sometimes they work for what feels like hours only to see that little time has passed. At other times, they think they have written for a short time, only to find that hours have passed. Some activities make them cringe and drag, others engage them and their friends. They tell me writing is hard, is easy, has too many rules, is better when there are fewer rules, should have more guidelines. All these writerly desires and displeasures move them with respect to writing. We write on to the end of the piece, in the process and practice learning other things, so that when we reach the end of the piece, we realise we are now saying something different from when we began. And so, we go 'back' to the beginning, to find it is not the same beginning we remember; we must rewrite that beginning and rewrite on to the end where we find ourselves, again, somewhere else. As Massey (2005) said, it is not the same 'here' when it is no longer the same 'now'.

As an early-career English teacher, my relationship with students and their texts shifted on the day a phrase jumped out at me from a hurriedly composed 'imaginative response' for an English examination. The student writer described friends who *danced like monkeys* in front of an evening campfire, providing me with one captivating image in an otherwise awkwardly constructed 'journey' recount. Over the years, these kinds of images surfaced to catch my attention: kneeling to *tighten his boots* before a high-stakes kick, a hunting dog *howling on a pig* in the outback scrub, a *nod, initiating a game* between strangers on a basketball court. I seek them out like 'firefly intensities' (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 4), these moments in writing that capture my students' ability to affect and be affected. For me, this pedagogical experience (Leander & Ehret, 2019) changed the way I thought about the teaching of writing, particularly when I shifted my teaching to a rural town, some eight hours drive north-west of Sydney. There I immersed myself in writing: my own writing, academic and creative; my students' writing; and research about writing. I sought ways to represent our experiences of a small rural town and the writing we created there. All this writing in service of me practising as a writer, thinking about what I ask my students to do, thinking about how to extend my students' writing.

Background

This article draws on research conducted between 2014 and 2022 and includes writing artefacts from a writing project in 2016 with the external non-profit arts agency WestWords, and an urban boys' high school, Leveson Boys High School (Dove, 2022). From 2015 to 2020, I was an English teacher in the small rural school of Nettleton's Drop, which sits in the broader context of the geographical area of north-western New South Wales and the participants in my research were my students. The research addressed the problems of an absence of the voices of students who experience deficit discourses in the educational landscape and a lack of space in the English curriculum for creative forms of writing. As part of the writing project, students were immersed in writing workshops, at school and on camp. In presenting my research, I took a writerly approach to pursue the aesthetic and affective potential of texts that I wanted my students to craft. I used nonlinear poetic and narrative forms and imaginative recreations in my analysis of data. Over the course of my time in the school and the town, I wrote journal entries, field

notes, poetry; I asked students to write about what interested me and hopefully them; I collected their writings; I wrote their writings into researcherly case stories; I rewrote their words into poetic and narrative forms. I wrote all these things together into immersive, creative, poetic texts that I hope will tell their stories respectfully and engage readers in worlds far from the metropolis.

As a research methodology, ethnography offered a way for me to compile detailed stories from the context of the school and town. While case studies provide a delimiting *process* for investigating a phenomenon or case in 'its real-life context' (Yin, 2018, p. 16), they continue to seek to represent a *bounded* case. Instead, I accepted Taylor's (2013) view of the 'case as space', and followed the more expansive methodology of case *stories*. Ackerman et al. (1996) offer this explanation for the case story: 'the case story … is an approach that blends aspects of the conventional case study method with the tradition, artistry, and imagination of story-telling' (p. 21). Poetic inquiry and narrative inquiry generated creative forms of writing: imaginative recreation (Adams, 2004; Stratta et al., 1973), found poetry (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009; Faulkner, 2020) and creative nonfiction. My researcher journal created a space to develop my own writerly voice and to reflect on my students' writing.

Much research regarding writerly identities privileges the voice of the teacher, or at least positions the teacher to speak for their students, while the voices of students are largely absent (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; DeJaynes et al., 2020). The limited presence of student voices in educational research and stories about the places they inhabit are paralleled by the invisibility of students' contexts in mass testing analysis. After my first year in town, I decided I was tired of the voices of teachers and wanted to hear from students. I asked my colleagues to assist with data collection by crafting assessment tasks that would allow me to follow a plan developed with WestWords for a writing project for my students and those at Leveson Boys. *Term One: A piece of narrative or imaginative writing, based on a nonfiction, student-selected topic, as an assessment task in a programmed nonfiction unit; Term Two: In-school writing workshops with a visiting author; Term Three: Peer feedback sessions to respond to writing from the 'city' school and a writing camp mid-way between our two schools; Term Four: A writing camp anthology; throughout: Any other writing samples the students offered me.* In the following two years, I conducted interviews with six students who had participated in the writing project. Two of their voices feature here – Zeinab's and Xander's – although others are present and my own is inescapable.

Researcher journal, Term One 2016: Telling stories in class

I want my students, who are studying nonfiction this term, to understand the power of an anecdote within a nonfiction text. In a few weeks, they have to present a speech on a topic important to them and, as part of their preparation, I asked them to write a story related to that topic. We discussed possible speech topics (pollution, slavery, poverty) for each of them in that small class – about ten Grade 9 and 10 students – and I asked each one to tell us a story. Some hilarity resulted as they told stories about pigging: the man who dipped his hands and feet in kangaroo blood then ran barefoot through the scrub, safe from thorny cat heads, 'one of the best hunters in town', my students said. About going shooting, becoming distracted, falling down a mine shaft, taking hours to claw their way up the shaft's netting, dirty, hot and tired, getting cleaned up and … going shooting. About playing hide-and-seek at night in the wheat fields, while a friend in a car searched for them, headlights off. I don't know what to think; I feel precious and citified, while they play true and false with me.

Interview, 2017: Favourite writing piece

I asked Zeinab and Xander to tell me about a favourite writing activity or piece of writing. Zeinab replied:

So, favourite writing piece
back in year nine,
a creative writing story about slavery,
pretty good, graphic and very fearful once
you read it,
real life things
into a creative kind of imaginative

and, um, yeah, got pretty good
marks for it too …

(For a moment I forgot,
I asked, the writing prompt for *Horus Inanne*?)

So, first, we had to research a major problem
in the world
pollution, slavery, poverty
we did a presentation on that.
From that presentation
we had to write a story, a creative writing piece,

about how a person or how someone
would experience it

2016: '*Horus Inanne*' (extract) by Zeinab

Zeinab wrote 'Horus Inanne', a tale of slavery in Cambodia where slaves could be seen supporting bulging baskets of rice plants on their heads for 16 hours a day, back and forth in the greasy, dank mud. She began, 'imagine'…

> Imagine if the world was a free and equal place. If black and white didn't matter. Men and women, old and young, strong or weak, literate or illiterate, if people didn't judge you for the colour of your skin or the freckles on your face. 'If only racism, inequality, slavery, violence and discrimination didn't exist. My name is Horus Inanne.' …
>
> Next thing I knew, we were walking down a narrow corridor, with black walls and the smell of agony. We finally stopped in front of an ordinary door, but what was behind that was a different story. As Lumberic slowly opened the creaky frayed door, an odour of sweat and blood came gushing out. The dark room was separated from everything else and what was inside was the reason why. …
>
> The thick, dark red liquid slithered down the crimson walls. A metallic aroma filled the room; the smell was enough for the hair on the back of your neck to stand. Lumberic entered the room first and as I followed after him, long whips with occasion rings and metal balls hung proudly on the walls, as though they were trophies.

Emergent writerly identities

My student participants and I considered our shifting explorations of self in constellation with our own more fixed ideas of identity and others' impressions of us. We recognised the desire for identity in writing, the performance of identity as iteration (Bhabha, 1994) in the back and forth of writing, and the ways student writers may be changed by the writing process. They come to their writerly identities through their bodies in place and come to know writing and themselves as visceral performance sites. The transformative effect of the creative act, described as a *making of the soul* by Anzaldúa (1987), could be reconceived as a coming to writerly identity, where affects of uncertainty and discomfort are recognised as transformative in-between places. In all the spaces that I find them, emergent writerly identities are characterised by movement, constant change, and multiplicity, like the throwntogetherness of places (Massey, 2005) and the potential for relational encounters.

Researcher journal, Term One 2017: Thinking poetically

What about writing about place … about the place you live? I can't imagine this place being everyday, I can't imagine living here being normal. My mind drifts past the town boundaries to seek all the spaces beyond and, in that imagining, I see my remoteness and isolation and loneliness in relation to the spaces that I inhabit beyond this town, all the colour and movement and time and space that comes from travelling often, trailing out and into new spaces populated by people and places. It is no surprise that poetry insists on its place here; 'thinking poetically puts us in the midst of movement. It does not claim to understand, to complete a thought, or to still the movement of becoming' (Freeman, 2017, p. 82). Of course, this place is mundane in its familiarity to young people who have grown up here, but the town is a threshold in itself for me, temporarily occupying space, never certain when, but always certain that, I will leave.

Interview, 2017: Difficulties with writing

'What have you found difficult about writing?' I asked Zeinab and Xander.

Zeinab reflected. 'I like working with prompts but if it's just like, meh … Like, I don't want to work with it.'

'Can you remember a particularly poor prompt?'

She could, they both could, and
like it's an in-joke, it inspires sly laughter.

The one that sort of said,
it was just way too dark …
or was it …
inside it was dark and gloomy, the world outside was …
it was completely different …
or something.

I think Miss Edwards was expecting us to go outside
because the outside was described,
the outside was,
brighter.

Yeah, cos I opened the door and then
I slammed it.
That was kind of like, my ending …
Miss expected us to go outside.

Zeinab seemed to recognise that 'even when the teacher's aim is control and closure rather than openness, subversion may create openness again' (Taylor, 2013, p. 811). Xander told me he remembered this piece too, but wanted to talk about a different

writing experience.

It was a couple of weeks ago,
but I did that to my own accord and,
I don't know,
because I was watching poetry,
some slam poetry on the internet
and … there's this guy, his name is … Neil Hilborn?
And he's got, um, one of his poems is called
OCD and …
And he's got one called *Joey* and he,
inspired me to write that.

I imagined Xander, like Hilborn, on a slam poetry stage.

Um, hi everyone (taps on mike), I wrote a sort of poem at about two in the morning one night and, um, and it was called Living with Guests, *um, it was about, you know, sort of the different aspects of my own personality that have been personified that, um, you know, in a creative and kind of morbid way and I don't know, I think I have to work on it more because it is 2am and it's, probably doesn't make much sense but …*

2016: When I was younger (and others) by Xander (author writing prompts, in-school writing workshops)

When I was younger

When I was younger, I thought I was normal. I thought that one day I would grow up and everything would be okay, I'd be just like every other person in the world. As you can probably tell, this was not the case: Depression, 2014. Anxiety, 2015. Sleep insomnia, 2015.

Outside my window

Outside my window, there would be nothing but the night. As a kid, I was afraid of the dark. But when I was looking out that dark window I was more scared of what might be looking back.

The saddest thing I ever experienced

The saddest thing I ever experienced was when the family dog died. She was an old sheep dog and died of old age. When we had to break the news to Payne that she needed a needle to put her to sleep, his white face turned red with sadness as he collapsed into mums arms.

Imagine(atively) recreating

So, because I don't have a copy of Xander's 2am poem, but I do have this writing from the in-school writing workshops with author James Roy, I imagine(atively recreated) a poem.

Two in the morning – Jennifer

When I was younger, I thought
I was normal. I thought that
one day
I would grow up and everything would
be okay
I'd be just like
every other person in the world.

you can probably tell
this was not the case.
Twenty fourteen, depression
twenty fifteen, anxiety
twenty fifteen, sleep insomnia,
depression, anxiety, sleep
insomnia
twenty four seven
You can probably tell.

Outside my window
there would be nothing
but the night
nothing but the night
as a kid I was afraid of the dark
but when I was looking out
that dark window
I was more scared of what might
be looking back.

Space for writing

The development of critical, imaginative, affective student writing requires space to develop processes, practices and pieces. English teachers are encouraged to focus on regularly tested forms of writing (persuasive texts, essays) rather than creative forms of writing, such as narrative, poetry and literary nonfiction (Gannon & Dove, 2021). Tested forms tend towards formulaic approaches (PEEL, TEEL, the five-paragraph essay) rather than authentic writing with its accompanying activities of planning, drafting, editing and reviewing. Understandings of writing as situated (Comber, 2015; Corbett & Green, 2013; Cormack & Comber, 2013), meaning-centred and social (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Snyder, 2008) provide opportunities to share stories (Misson, 2014) and to engage creatively with the known and the unknown. Away from talk of standardisation and grammar debates is the love of English that teachers, and potentially (hopefully) their students, have for their subject, and the affective potential of English for students to open themselves up to texts, places and each other.

The continued drive towards standardisation raises expectations of conformity among students in terms

of writing forms and development. Standardisation ignores different capacities and rates of development across the 'writing lifespan' or the trajectories of writing, leading to systemic decisions about curriculum and assessment that fail to support students' improvement (Bazerman et al., 2017). Students are not afforded the space and time to undertake composing activities of reading, drafting, reflecting, editing and refining that are intended to create meaningful texts. I asked Zeinab and Xander about experiences in English they haven't enjoyed. Zeinab talked about time:

When it's timed,
it just makes it hard,
with creative writing you get new ideas
at different times
when you're inspired,
so, when you have a set time and you have a prompt,
you can only go for that, you can't expand it,
you can't really incorporate *you*
into the story.

Xander talked about the constraints of time too, but also the affordances of space:

X: And, like, the half-yearly exam, so,
we knew we had sort of like two hours
to do the whole exam …
you're left with about half an hour to write
this story
you base things off what you see
last time I had to do it,
a poetic writing text,
I went and sat in a tree for two hours and just …
looked around.
I wrote down what I saw, what it smelt like,
like I did at Cypress Pines camp,
that helped … but I don't think I,
I don't think I do as much as I could
creative writing wise
outside of school because that was again
a school task but I …
I should do more.

Zeinab spoke often of space, outside space.

Sometimes
I feel like writing so
I'll go sit outside and write or
just sit alone and write
I'll write a story and I,
I try to plan out but I just,
planning out just doesn't go with me,
I hate planning out
it's just something I cannot do how much any,
like I'll try
but
it's just like, urgh
I feel like if you have to follow something,
like an analytical essay, that is so much …
there's a criteria, dot, dot, dot, you know …

The prevalence of metrocentric pedagogies as the basis for standardised forms of testing fails to consider the experiences of these students. Context-attentive pedagogies (Dove, 2022) provide opportunities for authentic writing, for textualising places (Gannon, 2011) and imaginative recreations. Context-attentive pedagogies also recognise the essential professionalism of teachers (Smyth, 2016) and their ability to create rich, contextualised writing activities to assess their students. For the English classroom, with its focus on language, context-attentive pedagogies address NSW English Syllabus outcomes related to context and the ways 'texts can represent personal and public worlds' (NESA, 2017, p. 18) – outcomes not addressed by writing rubrics used in standardised testing.

Interview, 2017

Have that freedom and write – Zeinab

I really liked the Cypress Pines writing camp,
we weren't forced to write in a way,
we were there for writing
but we weren't forced to, like,
you have to do this,
it has to be finished by then.
It was kind of, a free open environment
you could work with someone
if you wanted to,
we could go wherever
to write,
to have that freedom and write what we wanted,
just let us
Just explore different parts of ourselves.

Stepping stones, part one – Xander

And yeah, the Cypress Pines camp was quite good
we weren't really forced to do anything, but
we were more …
… inspired
You'd go out and sit in the grass
and write what you see
and that was the prompt for it, and it was …

Like, when you have to,
I guess working with a prompt that's … not … good,
when you're forced to write creatively
about a subject that doesn't really connect with you,
you can't put an extra bit of …
gusto into the text.

You go outside, you write – Zeinab

I was not inspired so I went outside.
I just like to write when I'm outside.
I guess
you're in a small place
you'll be writing something
that's not very free
you go outside
you write
you'll write something that's broad
has more ideas behind it
it's, like, it's a symbolism, I guess.

Formulaic answers to problems of literacy, English and creative writing deny the power of identity, voice, affect, place, context and relationality. They deny the power of the entanglement of those ideas with the students in front of us and what they might create given sufficient space and time. I am alert to the potential of the early drafts students hand me as though they are done. I tell them they're not done (sorry) – 'because look, here and here, at what your work could become, at what your work is hinting at becoming'. And some will go with me, and some will shrug me off, and I wonder if the latter would happen less if there were more space and time for students' writerly identities to emerge and if there was more valuing of the relationality, affect and context that intersect at the moment of writing.

Interview, 2017: A guideline behind a guideline – Zeinab

When we have to write an essay,
we follow the structure,
that's a guideline but there's,
I feel like …
there's a guideline behind that guideline
that you need to follow.
Writing … feel like
if there was something like a guideline
or something to
improve your writing, you know?
Or … I don't know,
but
I do know.

Like, some things you can be proud of,
may not get you the best marks but, you know,
you've put your effort into it,
you know you've done your best

I don't know,
you follow a guideline and,
you put everything in
but there's always, you're missing some …
things,
but, you don't know what you're missing.

The relationship between reader and writer is lost in the standardisation of writing outcomes. Also lost is the potential for interaction and an understanding of the relationship between writer and reader (Matsuda, 2015; Wilkinson et al., 1980), for an understanding that what is happening to the reader may be different from what the writer intended (Fish, 1972), and for identity work that takes place as the writer develops a relationship with the reader (Ryan & Barton, 2013). Instead, what readers make of the text is often lost in a 'critiquing and unpicking [of] the uniformity and banality of "standards"' (Hattam et al., 2018, p. 299) and in teaching that frustrates the expression of young people's writerly identities.

Interview, 2017: Stepping stones, part two – Xander

When I have to write
an essay or write a creative text,
I always get a hard copy of it to scribble on cos,
that's when I actually fix it up,
get rid of that and
write something else in there and,
because you don't think,
pay enough attention to it when it's just
on a computer screen,
but then again, if I wrote it down on a piece of paper
and then wrote it
and then tried to scribble all over it,
I wouldn't be able to, I'd have to print,
I'd have to start typing it out or
start writing it down again and then be, like,
okay, no wait, um …

I think if I collected all of mine,
scribbled on drafts,
I'd have a pretty big pile. I've got this
sentimental connection.
Yep, it's a stepping stone,
sort of thing
It's a stepping stone …

The liminal processes of writing entangle with third space, borderlands, affect and relationality to prompt unique spatio-temporal moments in which writerly identities emerge. The emergent writerly identity is unbounded, in contrast to ideas about identity that rely on constrictive labels. While providing a sense of belonging, identity labels restrict the generative spatial exploration of one's sense of self and ideas about lifeworlds (Soja, 1996) because writerly identities and writing emerge from the back and forth of identity constructions and formations. These fleeting spatio-temporal emergences may be unrecognisable from different or later points in space, and resist boundaries that capture because the writer (and their readers, including themselves) no longer exists (Massey, 2005). Writing, like a liquid, like glass or concrete, like *place*, transfixes us with its appearance of solidity but is always, like our own writerly identities, in motion. Attempts to fix students' writerly identities at particular, defining points deny their ongoing emergence and may have the effect of fixing students' beliefs about their identities.

Interview, 2017: By hand, helps me think – Zeinab

What I do is I write it,
By hand
I have this pen that I use every time I have an assessment
and this booklet so I work in that
and then I type
and then I print it
and then I scribble all over it
and then I type it again
and fix it
I can't just type it up straight away,
I can't do it so
I have to write it,
I, just, helps me think.

Someone might think it's rubbish cos it's got scribbles
all over it but to you,
it's, it's more than scribbles
my bag's just full of the stuff that I've scribbled on
for the last assessment we had
And you don't want to just,
you can't throw it away,
what if I need it for something else, you know?

Each writing moment has the potential to 'initiate new signs of identity … consist[ing] of two critical aspects: a person's relationship with the external world (surroundings/others) and their relationship with self' (Brady, 2016, p. 153). Each writing moment is a relational moment of becoming: a moving performance and articulation beyond the researcher's ability to contain except in recorded data capture points, even while such capture continues to drive much writing pedagogy in schools.

My student participants and I recognise the desire for identity in writing, the performance of identity, the back and forth of writing and place. In the uncertainty and entanglements of borderland spaces, student writers (any writers) may be changed by the writing process.

Interview, 2017: Read, ripped up, re-written – Xander

And, you know, all good creative writing texts have been
read, ripped up, re-written,
Like, my art teacher inspired me
to write this 2am because she said to
do something
because working on a major art
I'm going to have to
get an idea of what I'm going to do,
I'd sort of sparked
what I wrote cos …
I had to come up with an idea and I just couldn't
maintain it in my head
and I had to write it down,
turned into a poem.

Writerly identities are multiple, socially constructed and always emerging. Taking Massey (2005) as my example, I attempted to work 'through situations and engagements in which the question of space has in some way been entangled' (p. 13) by noting the ways space and place are constitutive of writerly identities through the materiality of third space, borderlands and affect. Writerly identity is a perpetually shifting element of self; through space and time (and their implicit relationality), it is articulated and performed in events of writing. This articulation and performance of writing emerges from place, encouraging a material, rather than datafied, perception of writing.

2018 – The boy with the basket of books by Xander (writing for exams, extract)

In a world like this, you hope it kills you. The war, the bomb, the bullet, the accident, you hope you don't come out of the other side. Those misfortunate enough to survive in a world like this become the people sitting

> on blankets, head lowered and cup raised. They become the occupants at spaces in streets that you perceive to be dark and dirt; but they seem to find safe and serene. They become the pathetic pieces of trash you see trusting whether or not they'll eat to the hands of the generosity of the passerby.
>
> …
>
> 'Books!
>
> Books!
>
> Books!'
>
> A young boy's voice plays a rehearsed sales pitch to the voice of an older woman.
>
> 'One for fifteen, two for twenty-five'
>
> No further words are spoken. When the woman leaves, I raise my head out of sheer curiosity, standing to make my way over to the boy with the basket of books.

Writing as place

Amid drought and students and weathered highways, I explored the limitations of writing as a spatial event and my response to the 'constraints' described by students: time; nothing can be new; the hidden curriculum; and their affective impact on writing and writerly identities. Anzaldúa (1987), in responding to the constraints of cultural identity, embraces

> a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will … It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. (p. 16)

As a response to the entanglement of writing, time, space and outside authorities (for me, read: metrocentric authorities), the *kicking-out with both feet* represents the emergence of Anzaldúa's own writerly identity, and I recognise the action in myself and my students. This description invites readers to enter a personal space in which the space of writing as both kicking-out and invitation become boundaries to that which we react against and refuse, and that with which we choose to engage.

In coming to the place of *writing as place*, I came to an understanding of the bundled trajectories of the town and our intersecting lives: mine and those of my students. In the immediacy of the intersection of trajectories (of people, places, non-human living beings, geography, and all kinds of local and global contextual factors), all found in writing and in the small rural town of this research, I came to understand that '[e]verything depends on the dense entanglement of affect, attention, the senses, and matter' (Stewart, 2010, p. 340) and 'to understand space as an open ongoing production … that makes room for a genuine multiplicity of trajectories, and thus potentially of voices' (Massey, 2005, p. 55). I came to understand the necessity of creating spaces for emerging writerly identities. This way of understanding writing as place was evident to me each time I traversed the interstitial spaces of the town and each time I took up a piece of student writing to mark, when I was reminded that while '[t]he elements of this "place" will be, at different times and speeds, again dispersed … yet, in its temporary constellation we (must) make something of it' (Massey, 2005, p. 141). Retaining my awareness of each of these processes, practices, pieces and places as 'the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing' (p. 141) allowed me to experience my writing and the writing of my students beyond fixed points in space and time.

In the possibility and creation of different spaces, we can offer students all the spatial elements of writing (prompts for writing, physical locations for writing, relationality, even constraints measured in form and line). It is possible to create something from all the trajectories that intersect in the liminal space of writing as process and practice. It is possible to offer relational spaces in which affective capacity is welcomed.

2018: This place by Zeinab (writing for exams, extract)

> The drive in my SUV was long. The road stretched for miles. The dead, yellow grass by the roadside was long, swayed in the afternoon breeze. The closer you got the more dead it got. The dirt went from non-existent to red to white. White dirt, white rocks everywhere. Trees scattered over every inch of the landscape, half alive, half dead.
>
> I drove over the metal grid, the car jerking crossing over the barrier … The blue coloured mining machine on the left of the road, fading in colour. I had lived my whole childhood and still didn't know, had no clue what it was. Maybe this place was never for me.

Reflection – Zeinab

Constraints against writing, what prevents you from incorporating *you* into the writing, writing against the clock at set times, particularly poor prompts, being inside … all these spaces for writing present

opportunities to disrupt expectations, slam doors, be inspired. Guidelines behind guidelines, not knowing what you're missing, longing for a free, open environment to explore parts of yourself, scribbled on pieces of paper.

Dusty willy-willies, rusted fence lines, grazing mobs of emus picking through fields of dirt. Scars on the road from cars bottoming out on the rough surface and, as I watched the road, ghostly semi-trailers resolved out of the glossy shimmer of the highway ahead. I thought about all the things I've missed while I've been living out here, mountains, trees, bushwalks. I thought about the town where I am worn down now with the dust and sadness and burrs and racism and sexism and the distance from mechanics, chiropractors, physios, beauticians, foods. But then most of the time these things don't matter; you use what's here and you can accept your limited choices, unlike the metro-centres who want and want and seem to clamour with that want, the need for more of everything, more choices of nothing really worth anything.

Maybe this place was never for me. I love this imagining of Zeinab's, the young woman writing into her imagined future in which she, like me, lives a long drive from this town. I thought about how we label disadvantaged students, putting the disadvantage first, interfering with our perception of them and their work.

Reflection – Xander

Xander rejects the label of disadvantage and reminds me 'that growing up in a rural place is not a burden. It's a catalyst for collaboration and new thinking' (Halsey, 2018, p. 69). The differences we see in schools are greater than socioeconomic status or gender or ethnicity. They might be Aboriginal, boy or girl, remote-schooled, disadvantaged, keeping quiet about sexuality or gender identity, but in the far north-west of the state my students rarely use these descriptors when talking about themselves, except to assert their power. More usually they identify themselves through their relationships to family, friends, the town, the place, the experience. Through moments or habits or narratives.

Stories, writing and reflections of place were taken up by Xander in his poetry and short-story writing. In the spatial moment of a 2 am bedroom, he takes up the inspiration of the poetic work of spoken-word artist Neil Hilborn to find his own way into writing. I don't have a copy of that poem, so I imagined one and wrote two. I called one *Two in the morning* and the other *Destiel*.

Destiel – Jennifer

A scribbled note in the margin
2015 – Depression
was altered to read
2016 – press on D
On another margin,
2015 – Depression
with an illegible signature following.
Down one side of the page
Dean ©
had been added in front of
2016 – Castiel
also signed and followed by
= Destiel
It is not completely clear
who wrote these things.
But
Destiel, Destiel, Destiel
recurs over and over,
all over the page in between Xander's writing.
And finally,
in one corner,
I ship it;
a reference to the act of combining
the names of two lovers.

These kids … every time I think I'm on top of it all, they catch me out. All over Xander's handwritten draft (*When I was younger, my home, the saddest thing*) from the in-school writing workshop, the word 'Destiel' has been scrawled by Marshall, another research participant. So, as the kids say, I searched it up. 'Destiel is the ship name for the fictional gay relationship between Dean Winchester and Castiel from the TV show *Supernatural*'. I made 'mind blown' hand actions to myself. Because … what? I know Marshall is obsessed with *Supernatural*. It's come up. What did Xander write that prompted this reaction? And why is this so intriguing? On this page, I sense there's something about desire, a desire to be elsewhere. To be otherly

to be unfixed, a process like driving to and from,
like taking a wrong turn and finding yourself
somewhere you want to be, without knowing that
was
what you wanted.
Incomplete, a narrative?
questions unasked or unanswered.
feel like I read something

like this already. The students' writing prompts different
responses, signposts different trails.

of leaving and staying

a page and returns when the reader turns the page.
And continues there, following a necessary space or silence.
The writing splits in two like one
student telling a a student telling
different, though a story about writing and
story.

leaving and staying.
The writing goes off the

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Reading Rurally for (Professional) Pleasure: What Enables and Constrains the Recreational Reading of Secondary English Teachers in Rural NSW?

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Abstract: This paper explores what, how and why rural secondary English teachers read for recreation. Recreational reading has received increasing attention in popular media, academia and English syllabuses in recent years, with the work of Cremin et al. (2014, 2023) spearheading research into the significance of reading for pleasure for primary teachers and their students. However, there have been few major studies conducted into the recreational reading habits of secondary English teachers, and this gap is extended when we consider Australia, especially rural Australia. The paper is based on a current qualitative, multiple-phase explanatory study consisting of surveys (n = 29) and follow-up interviews (n = 2) in which secondary English teachers from rural schools in NSW were asked about their recreational reading habits and what constrains such reading. The paper is informed by sociospatial theory (Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Soja, 1980, 1996), which imagines teachers' lives as comprising three spaces: the real, everyday 'firstspace', the idealised 'secondspace' and the innovative 'thirdspace'. The survey and interview results provide insights into the reading behaviours of rural English teachers, as well as illuminating several aspects of their personal and professional lives that enable and constrain recreational reading. The paper concludes with several recommendations for future areas of study.

Keywords: recreational reading, secondary English teachers, rural teachers, reading teachers, Australian English teachers, reading for pleasure

Introduction

The recreational reading of secondary English teachers has thus far been largely absent from public and academic discourse, and to date there has been no research into the recreational reading habits of secondary English teachers in rural Australia. Research into the effects of remoteness suggests factors relevant to a consideration of English teachers' recreational reading. The long-established challenge of attracting and retaining rural teachers (Burke & Buchanan, 2022; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Reid et al., 2010) contributes to inexperienced teachers in rural and regional schools experiencing additional demands compared to those in metropolitan schools, as do challenges in experiencing timely, quality teacher professional learning, which is usually metropolitan-located and -focused (Beswick et al., 2022). The work of teachers in rural schools can also be intensified due to a lack of specialised health services for students with special needs (Beswick et al., 2022) and the frequent need to teach out-of-field (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021). Together, these dimensions can create distinctive challenges in the areas of professional workload and growth for teachers working in non-metropolitan schools, and have the potential to shape the recreational reading of rural English teachers.

Defined by Cremin as 'volitional, choice-led reading of any kind of text' (2020,

p. 29), recreational reading is also known as 'reading for pleasure' (Cremin, 2020), and increasingly, in Australian educational contexts, 'reading for enjoyment' (ACARA, 2018, 2022; NESA, 2022). While a vast body of international research demonstrates the benefits of recreational reading across an array of academic, interpersonal and socioeconomic indicators (Cremin, 2020; Garces-Bacsal et al., 2018; Merga, 2015, 2016), there is growing global concern about declining reading rates (Cremin, 2020; Griffin & Mindrila, 2023; Underwood, 2021), and over the past six decades, a substantial body of international research raising concerns about how much teachers read has emerged (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Cremin et al., 2014; McKool & Gespass, 2009; Mour, 1973; Mueller, 1977). This is despite teachers being uniquely positioned to support and promote positive reading attitudes and habits in their adolescent students – especially secondary English teachers due to the relevance of reading to the content and skills of subject English. While the recreational reading of English teachers is not explicitly mentioned in syllabus documents, the recreational reading of students has become a feature of the most recent iterations of the Australian and NSW English syllabuses (ACARA, 2022; NESA, 2022), and research demonstrates that a strong connection exists between teachers' reading habits and those of their students (Cremin et al., 2014, 2023; Merga, 2016).

Merga (2015) highlights the 'paucity of research that examines the recreational reading practices of Australian secondary English teachers' (p. 46). This study therefore aims to address the dearth of research about what, how and why English teachers read, with a specific focus on better understanding the enabling and constraining factors that shape the recreational reading of teachers working in rural schools. Indeed, it aims to enable the voices of rural English teachers to be heard and valued (Beswick et al., 2022) without reference to oftentimes deficit-shaped comparisons to metropolitan teachers.

Rurality

The complexities surrounding the definition of rurality are well documented (e.g., Green, 2015; Green & Letts, 2007; Roberts, 2021; Roberts & Green, 2013). The rural can be a geographic, economic, political and cultural construct, and yet none of these categories fully capture the nuances of the communities that live 'beyond the metropole' (Green & Letts, 2007; Roberts, 2021; Roberts et al., 2024). In Australian education contexts, little has been done to move away from a metrocentric approach to curriculum, and subsequently a deficit view of regional, rural and remote schools, teachers and students remains pervasive (Roberts, 2021; Roberts et al., 2024). Simultaneously, as mentioned above, there are unique and multifaceted aspects of teaching rurally which validate a specific focus on the voices and experiences of secondary English teachers who teach in rural schools.

Recreational Reading Habits of Teachers

Most of the research into the reading habits of teachers has focused on in-service teachers in primary or elementary schools, and preservice teachers still completing their tertiary studies and with limited classroom experience. There is scant research on in-service secondary teachers, or on English teachers in rural settings.

Primary Teachers' Recreational Reading Habits

Most research into the recreational reading habits of in-service primary school teachers is based in the United States and United Kingdom (Cremin et al., 2014; McKool & Gespass, 2009). McKool and Gespass's (2009) seminal US study found that only half the primary school teachers surveyed read for more than 10 minutes a day, even though they valued reading as a leisure activity. They spent more time 'planning and grading for work, watching television, completing household chores, and engaging in family activities' (McKool & Gespass, 2009, p. 271). Those teachers who did read for more than 30 minutes a day, however, were more likely to use 'best practice' instructional strategies such as literature circles, periods of sustained silent reading, sharing insights from their own reading, and recommending books to their students (McKool & Gespass, 2009).

The United Kingdom Literacy Association's project 'Teachers as readers: Building communities of readers', based on 1200 UK primary teachers, found that 73% had read for recreation in the preceding month (Cremin, 2011; Cremin et al., 2014), with women's popular fiction, crime and thrillers the genres most frequently chosen. However, as Merga (2016) points out, the study did not determine if this 73% reflected a daily or weekly habit of recreational reading.

Preservice Teachers' Recreational Reading Habits

Similar trends have been identified in international studies into the recreational reading of preservice

teachers (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Applegate et al., 2014; Nathanson et al., 2008; Rimensberger, 2014). Several of these studies encountered a significant contradiction between the high value that the trainee teachers placed on recreational reading and their own lack of reading engagement (Nathanson et al., 2008, Rimensberger, 2014). Lack of time and the replacement of reading with less demanding activities such as viewing films and scrolling social media were the most common reasons given by both in-service and preservice primary teachers in Norway for not reading (Skaar et al., 2018).

Developing and Sustaining Reading Habits

Exactly how individuals develop and sustain a regular habit of recreational reading is contested territory, but an interplay has been identified between reading habits, motivation and reading identity, all of which have been deemed to play a role in an active, lifelong passion for reading (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017; Cremin et al., 2023). Reading motivation – that is, the individual's personal goals, values and beliefs about reading (Griffin & Mindrila, 2023) – is a requirement for establishing a reading habit. Intrinsic motivators such as personal satisfaction and social connections have been shown to be predictive of positive reading motivation (Griffin & Mindrila, 2023) and sustained reading engagement and habits (Cremin, 2020; McKool & Gespass, 2009).

Sustained recreational reading habits are also linked to the development of a positive and robust reading identity: that is, identifying oneself as a capable, confident and adaptable reader (Cremin et al., 2023; Kerkhoff et al., 2020). Reading identity is in turn closely associated with self-efficacy – the belief that one will be successful in an endeavour (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017). However, the way these phenomena relate to one another continues to be a source of debate. For instance, studies into teacher reading habits have tended to assume that a lack of reading engagement denotes a lack of reading motivation (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Nathanson et al., 2008), but recent research into the reading motivation of teachers suggests other ways to interpret the inconsistency: namely, that there may be other barriers to teachers reading, such as workload and other time constraints (Griffin & Mindrila, 2023), claims supported by Skaar et al.'s (2018) findings.

Teachers' Reading Habits and Students' Reading Lives

The recreational reading habits of teachers matter because they shape the reading lives of their students. The work of Cremin et al. (2014, 2023) has foregrounded the importance of primary teachers who read both adult and children's literature for pleasure, and the positive impact this has on their students in general and their reading for enjoyment in particular. Cremin et al.'s research (2014) has also given rise to the Reading for Pleasure pedagogy model, and further studies into building communities of readers around 'Reading Teachers': teachers who read and readers who teach (Cremin et al., 2023). Cremin's major studies have, however, all been completed with primary school teachers, although she has referred to the possible applicability of her research to secondary English teachers (Cremin, 2011).

Similarly, Merga's (2016) work with secondary students in Western Australia highlights how attuned adolescents are to their teachers' reading, and concludes that in order to be successful models of recreational reading to their students, teachers need to talk about reading for pleasure, be seen to read independently, and read in class with expression. She also found that secondary English teachers were perceived by students as overall being less encouraging of reading than primary teachers (Merga, 2015).

These studies indicate that the recreational reading of teachers benefits not just themselves, but also their students. This is significant considering the aforementioned benefits of recreational reading, and the concerning decline of such reading among Australian adolescents over the past two decades (Underwood, 2021).

Factors Constraining English Teachers' Recreational Reading

English teachers face a distinctive range of challenges to reading recreationally, both professionally and personally. Primary among these is the issue of workload. Research into the workload of English teachers in NSW suggests that English teachers may experience an 'amplified version of performativity culture' (Manuel, Carter & Dutton, 2018, p. 6) in schools due to their role in preparing all students for high-stakes examinations and implementing significant curriculum reforms and syllabus changes, and due to English being the only compulsory subject

in NSW. Secondary English teachers have reported an average of 58 working hours per week – 20 more than the gazetted 38 hours (Manuel, Carter & Dutton, 2018) – and these reported hours were significantly higher than the average of 49.4 hours for secondary teachers overall (McKenzie et al., 2014). These findings sit within a broader, global context of increasing teacher workload and work intensification (Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Green, 2021) due to an increase in 'non-core work', including administrative tasks such as data collection and accountability requirements (Creagh et al., 2023). All of this points to the possibility that rural English teachers may experience constraints on their recreational reading time due to the pressures of their everyday teaching lives.

It is also possible that some rural English teachers lack a strong and positive reading identity, with research showing that some English teachers are entering the profession without sustained recreational reading habits (Rimensberger, 2014, Skaar et al., 2018). This has potential implications for the teachers themselves, as well as for their successful modelling and promotion of recreational reading among their students (see Cremin, 2020; Merga, 2016), because teachers' personal reading outside of school may shape the 'beliefs, attitudes, values, and dispositions about literary texts' that they bring into their classrooms (Sroka et al., 2022, p. 40). A recent US study found that some secondary English teachers felt pressure to read 'elevated' or canonical texts because they were more highly valued by the profession, but did not always include them in their own reported reading (Sroka et al., 2022). It is possible that these status distinctions between types of literature may be leaving rural English teachers unsure of their own literary expertise and subject content knowledge inside the classroom, and constraining them from truly choosing to read for recreation in their personal lives (Sroka et al., 2022).

Another potential constraint relates to the relative support of school leadership. Recent Australian research has highlighted the role school leaders play in promoting a whole-school reading culture – and, conversely, the potentially negative consequences on this culture if school leaders are not seen to actively promote and encourage reading among staff and students (Green, 2023; Merga & Mason, 2019). It follows that school leadership may play a role in whether rural secondary English teachers are constrained from recreational reading.

Finally, there has been a lack of policy supporting the recreational reading of both teachers and students in NSW. Prior to the release of the new NSW English K–10 Syllabus (NESA, 2022), reading for enjoyment had been down-shifted in recent syllabus documents compared to earlier Personal Growth-focused syllabus iterations. This follows a trend noted across both the United Kingdom and Australia (Cremin, 2020). This lack of official value placed on recreational reading may have influenced the reading of secondary English teachers, particularly in the form of modelling reading to students in school settings. In addition, recreational reading is not recognised as a form of professional development by NESA, the body that oversees professional accreditation in NSW (2024), despite its clear benefits for both teachers and students (Cremin et al., 2014, 2023), and this may have limited the value placed on personal reading (Hayn & Kaplan, 2012).

The reading of rural secondary English teachers matters because a love of subject, including a love of literature, is one of the most motivating factors inspiring individuals to join the profession (Dutton & Manuel, 2022). A review of international research into reasons for becoming an English teacher reveals they are more likely to join the profession for intrinsic and altruistic reasons, such as 'love of subject', than other cohorts of teachers (Dutton & Manuel, 2022). English teachers are also typically motivated by continuing a 'cycle of influence': that is, they choose English teaching because they had an English teacher who inspired their love of literature, and they want to continue this cycle with their own students (Dutton & Manuel, 2022). Successfully attracting and maintaining high-quality teaching staff in rural Australian schools remains critically important (Burke & Buchanan, 2022; Reid et al., 2010), and this adds value to identifying any constraints on rural English teachers' ability to engage with the literature they love through recreational reading, as this may influence their continuing passion for, and retention in, the teaching profession.

Research Context and Design

This paper reports an ethics-approved, qualitative, multiple-phase explanatory study. The data are drawn from a larger study into the recreational reading habits of secondary English teachers in NSW.

The research investigates the following questions:

1. What are the recreational reading habits of secondary English teachers in rural NSW schools?

2. What enables and constrains the recreational reading of secondary English teachers in rural NSW schools?

The study's first phase (Appendix A) was an online survey of Likert-style and open-ended questions, using both original items and modified ones drawn from seminal studies of teacher recreational reading (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; McKool & Gespass, 2009; Morrison et al., 1999). The second phase comprised semi-structured interviews (Appendix B).

The survey participants were recruited via the NSW English Teachers' Association Facebook page and email newsletter. Participants for the interviews were recruited purposively via the final item of the survey, in which participants indicated their willingness to be interviewed for the study, and all who expressed interest were interviewed.

Survey responses (N = 29: regional n = 26, remote n = 3) and interviews (N = 2: regional n = 1, remote n = 1) were completed by teachers from rural schools, with their locations determined by those who identified their school as being in 'regional' or 'remote' NSW. The sample comprised teachers across government, Catholic and Independent school sectors with a range of teaching experience from 0 to 40+ years, and with approximately one third of the participants occupying curriculum leadership roles.

Template analysis (King & Brooks, 2017) was employed to analyse the open-ended survey items and responses to interview questions, with descriptive statistics from the Likert-style survey items providing further detail on key thematic concerns. Template analysis offers a clear, systematic and flexible approach in which *a priori* themes can be used to build on existing theory and explore key issues raised by research questions (Brooks et al., 2015).

Theoretical Frame

The study's theoretical frame is sociospatial theory (Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Soja, 1980, 1996). In their seminal research into rural education, Green and Letts (2007) argue that space is 'one of the most-underexamined concepts in educational theory and practice' (p. 2). When applied to rural educational contexts, Lefebvre's tripartite theory posits that what happens in rural schools is a result of three interconnected 'spaces'. The 'real' space ('firstspace') consists of the everyday, lived experiences of rural teachers both inside and outside of the classroom, and can include climate, bell times, classroom organisation or assessment targets. The 'ideal' space ('secondspace') is how rural teachers' actions are imagined by external forces, like government bodies, academics or the media. For rural teachers, these include policy documents shaped by a 'metropolitan-cosmopolitan worldview' that fails to recognise 'rural knowledges' (Roberts, 2021, p. 124). These secondspace ideals are articulated in syllabus documents, educational policies, research papers and media articles that communicate society's expectations of rural teachers and schools, often via absence or deficit. Finally, the 'reimagined' space ('thirdspace') is a place of critique, innovation and problem-solving, where attempts are made to bridge any gaps between the first- and secondspaces. This thirdspace is the 'space to resist, subvert and re-imagine everyday realities' (Ryan & Barton 2013, p. 73).

This study is concerned with the intersection of two such spatialities: secondary English teaching and rural teaching. There are many secondspace reasons for English teachers to read recreationally in addition to the renewed focus on reading for enjoyment in syllabuses, research and popular media (see Cremin, 2020; NESA, 2022), including its benefits for themselves and for their students. However, the existing research, as well as the unique set of challenges faced by English teachers (see Manuel, Carter & Dutton, 2019; Sroka et al., 2022), suggests that there are aspects of the first- and secondspaces these teachers inhabit that may inhibit their recreational reading. These include firstspace pressures from high levels of administration, marking loads higher than those of peers in other faculties, and inadequate support for new syllabus implementation (Dutton & Rushton, 2018; Manuel, Carter & Dutton, 2018). Secondspace pressure is also shaped by high-stakes tests such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Gannon & McKnight, 2023) and Higher School Certificate examinations, and intensive forms of accountability and compliance from curriculum bodies and government policy makers (Manuel, Carter & Dutton, 2018; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020).

When these English teacher spaces are mapped against the rural education spatiality, an even more complex view emerges of teacher experience. The rural firstspace is intensified by its higher proportion of early-career teachers, the limitations on accessing timely, high-quality professional development, and the greater number of teachers teaching out of their subject areas. The rural secondspace is also fraught, due to the long history of rural schools and students underperforming

Table 1

Extended Texts Read Most Recently for Recreation

Fiction	Nonfiction
Raining in Mango – Thea Astley *Sooner or later, we all come home* – Roz Baker *Possession* – A.S. Byatt *Forbidden notebook* – Alba de Céspedes *Lessons in chemistry* – Bonnie Garmus *The haunting of Hill House* – Shirley Jackson *Demon Copperhead* – Barbara Kingsolver *Yellowface* – R.F. Kuang *All the little bird hearts* – Viktoria Lloyd-Barlow *Wolf Hall trilogy* – Hilary Mantel *The silent patient* – Alex Michaelides *The last devil to die* – Richard Osman *Snow crash* – Neal Stephenson *The magician* – Colm Tóibín *Anna Karenina* – Leo Tolstoy *The rules of civility* – Amor Towles *This is happiness* – Niall Williams *The dictionary of lost words* – Pip Williams *The storied life of A.J. Fikry* – Gabrielle Zevin *Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow* – Gabrielle Zevin	*Showing up* – Ned Brockmann *Windswept and interesting: My autobiography* – Billy Connolly *Teacher, teacher: An anthology of inspirational teachers* – Megan Daley (Ed) *When the adults change, everything changes* – Paul Dix *Wifedom* – Anna Funder (3 responses) *The motorcycle diaries* – Ernesto 'Che' Guevara *A guide to the orchids of South Western Australia* – Bob Liddlelow *Growing up in country Australia* – Rick Morton (Ed.) *The harp in the south* – Ruth Park *What makes us human?* – Author unknown

when compared to their urban counterparts and a deficit, isolationist view of non-metropolitan schools permeating discourse (Green & Letts, 2007; Roberts & Green, 2013).

This study aims to better understand these real, lived experiences of rural secondary English teachers in NSW, and shed light on any thirdspace innovations that do or could help English teachers close any gaps between the ideal and the real of their recreational reading.

Results and Discussion

Rural English Teachers' Recreational Reading Habits

The dataset revealed several aspects of the reading behaviours and habits of the NSW rural English teachers surveyed and interviewed.

Regular Reading Habits

Drawing on the work of Cremin (2011), this study has chosen to define regular recreational reading as having read a book (i.e., an extended fiction or nonfiction text) for pleasure in the past month. The choice was also made to take an inclusive definition of reading, encompassing fiction and nonfiction, and paper, audio and digital texts.

When asked 'What have you read most recently for recreation (i.e., a fiction or nonfiction text not required for work)?', up to 93% of participants reported reading some extended text for pleasure, with 17% making a general comment (e.g., 'Crime fiction'), 55% identifying one text title and/or author (e.g., 'Stephen King') and 21% identifying two or more texts and/or authors. These findings are encouraging considering the corpus of international research into teacher reading habits, as referenced above (i.e., Cremin et al., 2014; McKool & Gespass, 2009).

However, these results cannot be taken without caution, as the survey was open between Weeks 2 and 5 of Term 4, 2023, so most respondents had been on holidays within the past month, and the most common pattern of behaviour noted was that respondents read more for recreation during school holidays than in term time. This was made explicit in comments such as 'I collect piles of my books to plan my holiday reading' (Survey 6) and '[d]on't really read much during term time, no time' (Survey 1).

What Rural English Teachers in NSW Read. The study also provided rich data about what the secondary English teachers were choosing to read recreationally. Table 1 contains their responses when asked to report what they had read most recently for pleasure.

One pattern noted was the popularity of recently released books, with many titles published in 2022 and 2023 receiving multiple mentions across the survey, including *Wifedom* (Funder), *Yellowface* (Kuang) and *Demon Copperhead* (Kingsolver). This suggests a desire

to keep abreast of current trends in literature and to read books that are yet to be/may never be incorporated into the 'literary canon'. Framed by sociospatial theory, these choices can be viewed as thirdspace, representing rural English teachers' willingness to move beyond the secondspace and embrace literary innovation and possible new directions for their teaching.

Enablers and Constraints of the Recreational Reading of Secondary English Teachers in Rural NSW

A range of enablers and constraints for rural English teachers' recreational reading arose from the data. These have been organised under personal and professional headings because respondents often made distinctions between which aspects of their lives allowed, or precluded, their own reading.

Enablers of Recreational Reading

Personal Enablers of Recreational Reading

Positive Reading Identity. Overall, participants reported a positive reading identity, with 86% reporting that they have always thought of themselves as readers. The rural teachers also provided many positive descriptions of themselves as readers in the open-ended survey items, such as being '*avid*', '*wide*', '*absorbed*', '*ferocious*' and '*curious*' readers, and making comments such as '*I love reading*'. These results support the high proportion of regular readers within the cohort, reinforcing the connection between positive reading identity and sustained reading habits (Cremin et al., 2023; Kerkhoff et al., 2020).

There was some nuance in the data. Only 69% of participants identified as 'very' or 'extremely' devoted readers. Also, while 93% of survey respondents reported finding reading very relaxing, only a little over half said they would spend a day reading if they had the time. This aligns with the corpus of international research (i.e., McKool & Gespass, 2009; Rimensberger, 2014) that identifies a discrepancy between the positive reading identities and limited reading habits of other teacher groups. This is an area in need of further research and exploration because of the potential implications to English teachers' professional motivation if they are unable to engage with literature (Dutton & Manuel, 2022).

Intrinsic Motivation. Participants also provided various insights into what motivated them to read. Escapism ('*I use it as an escape*', Survey 15), pleasure ('*I find reading enjoyable and necessary*', Survey 20) and a love of literature ('*I love language, words and stories*', Survey 29) were the most common responses.

These comments align with the existing research that intrinsic motivators help to sustain not only reading motivation (Griffin & Mindrila, 2023) but also reading engagement and habits (Cremin, 2020; Guthrie et al., 2007; McKool & Gespass, 2009). However, Griffin and Mindrila (2023) also suggest that this motivation is not always enough to ensure a regular reading habit, and posit possible constraints such as teacher workload. This is further discussed in the Constraints section below.

Book Clubs. Book clubs were another theme, mentioned either as currently enabling teachers to read recreationally, or having the potential to encourage reading. This links to research which shows that English teachers value the social nature of reading (Sroka et al., 2022) and aligns with Cremin et al.'s (2014, 2023) focus on building 'communities of readers'. Six survey participants reported being part of a book club, with one interviewee describing their experience of joining a book club as '*wonderful for … my sanity … that collective sharing of a book*' (Interviewee A). When asked what their schools could do to promote recreational reading among teachers, another six respondents suggested book clubs as a potential enabler.

Professional Enablers of Recreational Reading

Rural School Context. Teaching in a rural context was explicitly identified as shaping the culture of recreational reading:

> *Quite strongly. Small rural school with a close-knit team of staff. We often share our books with one another, make recommendations, etc. Our remoteness leaves few other hobbies readily available.* (Survey 22)
>
> *I am at a very small school where I am the only full-time English teacher. All the staff at the school value recreational reading but we have not really made an explicit point of encouraging it because all of us are already doing it independently. We do regularly discuss what we're reading and make recommendations in our everyday conversation.* (Survey 21)

The above two participants see the size of their school's staff, combined with their rurality, as enabling their recreational reading. This merits further research into the connection between rurality and schools that foster recreational reading.

Classroom Benefits. Teachers also said their recreational reading was motivated by the benefits they saw it having in their classroom, such as '*I also enjoy reading to further my knowledge base and understanding in English, History and Science*' (Survey 22). Another felt compelled to read for recreation in order to better model reading to their students: '*Feel that when I preach to my students [that] good readers [are] good writer[s] and good writers are good readers[,] I should practice what I preach and model this*' (Survey 8).

When asked explicitly about connections between her own reading and her teaching practice, Interviewee B, in her first year of teaching, said her own personal reading also improved her subject content knowledge, allowing her to '*understand lots of different genres*', which assisted her in the classroom because '*even if you haven't taught that book before, that text, usually you've got some familiarity with, you know, the tropes … of that genre*'.

Reading Alongside Students. Reading at the same time as students in class was another enabler, with respondents referring to timetabled lessons dedicated to reading as a feature of schools that encouraged both students and teachers to teach ('*We have wide reading classes fortnightly in the library and teachers are encouraged to read with their classes*', Survey 7). Others took a more individual approach, with one teacher reporting, '*I read! in front of them, with them, for them and talk about what I'm reading and why it's valuable*' (Survey 20).

This echoes Merga's findings (2016), as well as her conclusion that opportunities for teachers to read independently in the presence of their students should 'be seized when they arise, and that teachers should not feel guilty for reading during this time, as it serves a vital educative purpose' (p. 266). These results suggest that schools can support this modelling by ensuring that reading opportunities belong firmly in the firstspace of teachers' daily routines.

School and/or Faculty Culture. More evidence of the importance of school culture were the comments about English faculties and/or schools that value, encourage and enable teacher's recreational reading. Several reported that their schools place a high level of value on reading ('*We have tried to create a culture that values reading in our school, through the creation of reading walls and poster displays*', Survey 5).

Others reported that their English faculty valued and enabled recreational reading:

> *My faculty tends to be quite well-read and for recreational purposes, as there's always discussion about what's on their bed side at the moment, what their Book Club is reading, or what has just been released in stores.* (Survey 2)

School Libraries and Librarians. Participants also reported how school libraries and librarians could enable teacher recreational reading. Various approaches were reported – for example, '*I've worked at a school with a library that would invite teachers to breakfast club to discuss books with students and actively celebrate teacher reading*' (Survey 19). Others, when asked how their schools could better support teacher recreational reading, pinpointed the library: '*The library could make recommendations to staff for books*' (Survey 28) and '*The school library could ask teachers what they would like to read*' (Survey 29).

These comments highlight the importance of school libraries in promoting reading, not only among students but also among staff. It is concerning, then, that a growing number of Australian schools are diverting funding away from librarians and library spaces (Merga, 2019), and there is no policy mandating the existence of libraries or qualified librarians in Australian schools (Merga & Mason, 2019). As one survey participant noted, '*the school library appears to be dying … Teacher librarians are like hen[']s teeth*' (Survey 14).

Constraints on Recreational Reading

Personal Constraints on Recreational Reading

Family. There was very limited reference to personal constraints, with two respondents noting the influence of having a young family. One reported that '*[m]any of my faculty have young children and so the time to read for pleasure is limited*' (Survey 29), with the other explaining their reading with the comment, '*I have young kids*' (Survey 15). This is supported by Sroka et al.'s (2022) finding that reading 'does not occur in a vacuum. Situations in life influence what and how one reads. One of these life situations involves having young children' (p. 42).

Professional Constraints on Recreational Reading

Teacher Workload. The most common constraint was teacher workload, with many respondents referring to a lack of time or heavy administrative workload precluding their recreational reading. Nineteen references to time were made across the dataset, with

representative comments including, '*lack of time is the greatest barrier to reading recreationally*' (Survey 21) and '*I wish I had time for more reading*' (Survey 24). These comments were supported by survey responses (see Table 4) which revealed that teachers spent most time planning for teaching; a third of respondents recorded spending between 3 and 5 hours on it in a week and another third recorded spending 5+ hours. This was followed by faculty-based administrative tasks, with 35% of respondents spending at least three hours on these tasks, and recreational reading.

Administrative tasks also featured when survey participants were asked how their school could better support teacher recreational reading. Almost one third mentioned reducing the amount of administration they were required to do, with comments such as reducing '*administrative tasks – amount of time required lesson planning, completing reports, programs, following up behaviour, and attending meetings*' (Survey 22).

These findings align with Creagh et al.'s (2023) findings about how non-core work is increasingly intruding into teacher workload, and NSW research reporting high working hours and work intensification of English teachers (Manuel, Carter & Dutton, 2018). OECD data also shows that Australian teachers' 'out of classroom' working hours increased significantly between 2013 and 2018 (Thomson & Hillman, 2019). The findings illustrate how secondspace imperatives form a significant firstspace constraint that English teachers in rural schools must overcome in order to read for recreation.

Work-related Reading. Participants also reported that their own reading was hampered by the reading they had to do for work. A distinction will be made between 'subject-enriching reading', defined here as reading texts for lesson preparation and programming new units of work or for recommending to students, and a more general professional reading of academic texts related to the teaching profession or pedagogy. Both kinds of professional reading were reported in the survey, but the former was mentioned considerably more often, and was repeatedly raised as an inhibitor to recreational reading. For example:

> *Everything I read I assess for applicability in class situations. In some respects [,] it feels limiting because I consider that I only have time to read material that is worth my professional time and status*. (Survey 14)
>
> *I fit it in when I can around professional reading and reading for lesson preparation. I would like more time to read YA texts but would have to take from my own recreational reading to do this*. (Survey 24)

Others reported similar experiences and suggested additional resources as a solution:

> *The best way to get teachers reading more recreationally is to remove the need to read for work all the time. I'd like to see NESA [NSW Education Standards Authority] and AIS [Association of Independent Schools, NSW] publish lists and reviews of great books for certain purposes to save teachers' time*. (Survey 14)

This argument was supported by Interviewee A, a teacher librarian, who said she wished she had '*time as librarian to share resources with English teachers … [and] do that in a way that doesn't add to their load, but lets them see, "Look, this is, this is a help to you if you want it"*'.

These comments about subject-enriching reading raise questions about exactly how we define recreational reading for secondary English teachers, and perhaps reframe the choices of what English teachers read. If the nature of their work requires so much reading,

Table 2
Time Spent Over Past Week and Weekend on Various Tasks

	None (%)	½ to 1 hour (%)	1–2 hours (%)	2–3 hours (%)	3–5 hours (%)	5+ hours (%)
Planning for teaching (i.e., lesson planning, locating materials/resources, reading set texts)	0	10	3	21	34	31
Reading professional materials (i.e., educational journals, educational books)	24	31	24	17	3	0
Recreational reading (fiction and/or nonfiction texts)	3	14	21	28	14	21
Marking student responses (i.e., formal assessments, classwork)	14	14	28	24	3	17
Completing school-level administrative tasks (i.e., contacting parents, writing reports)	0	24	28	24	7	17
Completing faculty-level administrative tasks (i.e., programming units of work, completing registers)	7	14	28	17	14	21

then any truly recreational reading, during which they can switch out of their English teacher role and simply enjoy a text with no connection to the classroom, becomes a thirdspace innovation amidst firstspace pressures.

School and/or Faculty Culture. In contrast to the responses already mentioned, other participants perceived their school and/or faculty cultures as constraining their recreational reading. Of these, some identified firstspace demands such as workload or lack of time as constraining the value of reading across the school or faculty: '*It is sometimes valued however life or work tends to get in the way and recreational reading is always what falls by the wayside first. We wish we could prioritise it more*' (Survey 9). Others made a clear distinction between the English faculty's attitude towards reading and that of the wider school community, or specifically school leaders:

> *Not at all [valued] in so far as it is not seen to be a necessary requirement, more an expectation that if you're an English [teacher] you like to read. But most of us don't have time. Did have a DEAR programme at school and the English teachers were the few staff who read alongside the kids, and then they scrapped the programme.* (Survey 1)

These comments regarding the role of school leadership reflect other Australian studies that have highlighted the potential of school leaders to promote, advocate for, and model reading for enjoyment and develop a positive school-wide culture where reading is socially acceptable and highly valued, but which also point to how the converse can be true, too (Green, 2023; Merga & Mason, 2019).

Unsure of Practicality. Finally, there was a group of respondents who could not see how the firstspace realities of schools could create more space for recreational reading, or if it was even prudent to do so. Of these, four mentioned the lack of practicality of recreational reading at school, like in '*[n]ot practical. Reading on playground duty??*' (Survey 13). Another questioned whether reading should be encouraged at all: '*I don't believe it is their [the school's] place to. I can make time to read but in the pace of life and the stage of my family, it is of low priority*' (Survey 25). For these teachers, the firstspace structures and secondspace pressures could be seen as constraining their imaginations so that they could not fathom a professional space that could (or would?) value their recreational reading, despite the extensive benefits it could have for their students (Merga, 2016) and them as teachers (Cremin et al., 2014, 2023).

Limitations

There are several limitations to the current study. Due to the limited scope of the project and relatively small sample size (n = 29 surveys + n = 2 interviews), the findings are not generalisable, nor are they representative, as they were only drawn from NSW teachers. Also, the sampling method contained potential biases which favoured teachers who were members of a professional body and who are actively engaged in digital forms of communication and social media platforms. In addition, there were no items specifically targeting the impact of location and geography on the experiences of rural English teachers.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The recreational reading of secondary English teachers, particularly those in rural contexts, has been under-researched, despite renewed interest in the benefits and value of reading in social and academic circles. This study aimed to begin filling this gap by improving understanding what rural teachers are reading for pleasure and what enables and hinders them from doing so.

Some of the findings were very encouraging. Most of the participating secondary English teachers were reading for recreation with some regularity, and the data provides a rich insight into their reading behaviour and preferences. The study also shows these teachers striving to move into a thirdspace of regular recreational reading amidst first- and secondspace constraints.

However, it is also clear that the working lives of these rural English teachers are being shaped by the same professional pressures that are shaping teacher experience all over the state, and indeed globally – namely, high workload and increased work intensification due to 'non-core' requirements and a performative teaching culture (Creagh et al., 2023) – and that these pressures constrain their recreational reading. This is problematic given that the love of subject English is a central to the 'call to teach' of English teachers, and also that reading is an important aspect of English teaching, with the potential to impact rural English teacher retentions.

Because some of these teachers reported experiencing a tension between the 'subject-enriching reading' identified above and recreational reading, it is recommended that current definitions of professional

learning (NESA, 2024) be expanded to explicitly include, at minimum, 'subject-enriching reading' as a necessary part of English teachers' ongoing professional development. Ideally, these definitions would extend to include recreational reading as well.

It is also recommended that future studies survey a larger cohort of rural teachers from across Australia and collect comparative data from teachers in metropolitan areas to compare results across different locales. Conducting case studies that encompass entire English faculties may also help researchers gain a more complete picture of the reading habits of teachers who may not have been willing to participate in a voluntary survey promoted online.

The findings of this study invite consideration of how the first- and secondspaces of secondary English teaching in rural schools can be better mediated to create space for recreational reading and shift it from a thirdspace, often subversive, practice undertaken by rural English teachers in snatched moments to a practice that is valued by secondspace educational stakeholders, and for which there is sufficient time in the firstspace busyness of their working lives.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

a. How many years have you been teaching? _____

b. Which of the following best describes the location of your current school?
Metropolitan
Regional
Remote

c. In which school system do you currently teach?
Government
Catholic
Non-government/independent

d. Please indicate if you currently hold any of the following roles:
Head of English faculty
Other higher duties or executive roles
None of the above

e. Which year groups have you taught for English in the 2023 school year? (Check all that apply)
Year 7
Year 8
Year 9
Year 10
Year 11
Year 12

f. Please indicate which Stage 6 English courses you have taught in the 2023 school year: (Check all that apply)
No Stage 6 classes
English Studies
English Standard
English Advanced
English EAL/D
English Extension 1 (including Preliminary/Year 11 Extension)
English Extension 2

Please note: For the purposes of this survey, the term 'recreational reading' is used to describe the voluntary reading of any text for pleasure **by teachers**. The term 'reading for enjoyment' is used to refer to the same kind of reading **by students** (as per the NSW K–10 English Syllabus (NESA, 2022)).

1. What have you read most recently for recreation (i.e., a fiction or nonfiction text not required for school)? _____ _____
2. Please indicate when you read [insert Q1 answer]:
   Within the last week
   Within the last month
   Within the last three months
   Within the last six months
   Over six months ago
3. In the **past six months**, have you read any young adult literature (YAL) for recreation (i.e., not a required school text)? If so, please list authors and/or titles below:
4. Think back to your most recent **school holidays**. What reading did you do? Are there any titles or authors that you can recall? Please indicate if this reading was for lesson preparation or for recreation.
5. Think back to your last **school term**. What reading did you do? Are there any titles or authors that you can recall? Please indicate if this reading was for lesson preparation or for recreation.
6. Describe yourself as a reader. What reason(s) do you have for responding in that way?
7. Below are some statements that teachers can use to describe themselves in general terms. For each statement, indicate how descriptive the statement is of you.

	Extremely	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Not at all
I think I am a devoted reader					
I'd rather watch a story on TV or in a film than read					
I've never really thought of myself as a 'reader'					
I like to spend a day reading when I have the time					
I get lots of personal satisfaction from my personal reading					
I don't find reading to be very relaxing					

8. Recall the **last week** that you worked as a teacher. How much time did you spend across the **weekdays and weekend** doing the following?

Hours spent reading	**None**	**½ to 1**	**1–2**	**2–3**	**3–5**	**5+**
Planning for teaching (i.e., lesson planning, locating materials/resources, reading set texts)						
Reading professional materials (i.e., educational journals, educational books)						
Recreational reading (fiction and/or nonfiction texts)						
Marking student responses (i.e., formal assessments, classwork)						
Completing school-level administrative tasks (i.e., contacting parents, writing reports)						
Completing faculty-level administrative tasks (i.e., programming units of work, completing registers)						

9. To what extent is the recreational reading of English teachers valued in your school and/or English faculty? Please explain your answer.
10. In your opinion, how could schools create more space for teachers to read recreationally?
11. Think about the English classes you currently teach. On average, across all of your English classes, how often do you use the following strategies?

	Never	**Rarely (once or twice a year)**	**Occasionally (once or twice a term)**	**Frequently (once or twice a week)**	**Very Frequently (daily)**
Read aloud in class a book of your own choosing					
Read aloud in class a book of students' choosing					
Take your students to the library					
Give students class time to read their own self-selected material					
Give students class time to discuss their own reading with others					
Have students respond to their own reading in a reflective journal or similar					
Recommend specific titles to the class					
Recommend specific titles to individual students					
Talk with your students about what they read					
Share insights from your own personal reading					

12. What is the **one thing** you do on a consistent basis that has the greatest impact in promoting reading for enjoyment amongst your students?

    Would you be willing to be contacted for a follow up interview (approx. 30 minutes via Microsoft Teams) about your recreational reading and promotion of reading for enjoyment in the classroom?

    Yes

    No
13. *(Conditional on 'Yes' in Q13)* You have consented to be contacted about a follow up interview. Please provide your name and best email address below.

    Name:

    Email address:

    Confirm email address:

Appendix B: Interview Instrument

1. What was the last book you read and really enjoyed?
   Prompt: When was that? What made it so enjoyable?
2. How would you describe your reading habits across your adult life?
   Prompt: Have there been periods when you have read significantly more or less? What reasons can you identify for this?
3. What is one thing that encourages you to read for pleasure? What makes you say that?
4. What is one thing that prevents you from reading for pleasure? What makes you say that?
5. When you were a student in primary or secondary school, were any of your teachers effective in sharing with you a love of reading? If so, how did they do this?
6. In what ways do you think your own recreational reading shapes your English teaching in general?
7. In what ways do you think your own recreational reading shapes how you promote reading amongst your students?
8. Tell me about a time when you felt successful in promoting reading for enjoyment amongst your students.
   Prompt: This could be for a class or an individual student.
9. The new K–10 English Syllabus contains outcomes specifically focused on the reading for enjoyment of students. How confident do you feel about promoting reading for enjoyment in your classroom?
   Prompt: What makes you say that?
10. What challenges do you face in regularly promoting reading for enjoyment in your classroom?
11. What would need to happen for you to feel better equipped when promoting reading for enjoyment amongst your students?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Distorting Reflections

Distorting Reflections: Senior Secondary English in New South Wales and Representations of Rurality

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Abstract: As the only compulsory subject in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate, subject English's significance in shaping young people's worldviews and identities is considerable. The NSW Senior Secondary English (Stage 6) syllabus, in particular, exerts a unique influence on student outcomes, university selection ranks and broader societal engagement. This article supports these claims by marshalling statistical analyses and an investigation of the NSW Senior Secondary English Prescriptions (i.e., set texts): our statistical analyses reveal disparities in access, participation and achievement across geographical, social and gender lines that impact negatively on students in rural parts of NSW; our investigation of prescribed texts demonstrates that rural disadvantage in curriculum access, participation and achievement is exacerbated by an implicitly 'literary' hierarchy in subject English that both neglects and distorts rural settings and perspectives. We show that where rural settings and perspectives are present in texts studied as part of Senior Secondary English in NSW, their depiction is inauthentic and negative, a failing that underscores the need for spatial-justice-oriented activism to challenge and reshape such depictions. Consequently, by outlining perspectives on how rural disadvantage in curriculum access, participation and achievement is produced, we shed light on this hidden process. The article ends with a call to 'ruralise' subject English in ways that are more inclusive of authentic rurality. Such ruralisation would, we believe, validate rural students' identities and expand the worldview of all students to include a rural perspective. Both outcomes would contribute to the sustainability of rural life in Australia.

Keywords: Rural, NSW Higher School Certificate, Stage 6 English, Text prescriptions, Literature

Introduction

A common trope employed by English teachers when describing the value of a given text acknowledges a 'mirror' or 'window' function. Some texts open students' eyes students to foreign people and places (text as window), while others compel them to reflect on their inner lives by describing ideas or experiences that are recognisable, but were inarticulable prior to a textual encounter (text as mirror). It may be true that the best texts perform both functions. In either case, however, the ways in which a young person sees the world and their place in it are influenced by the texts they are exposed to in subject English, as these contribute to both the formation of adult identity and the ways in which future citizens engage with, and contribute to, broader society. As the only compulsory subject in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate (HSC) – and thus also a major contributor to the calculation of each student's university selection rank – subject English occupies a unique and exclusive position that carries both privileges and responsibilities. It is with such privilege and responsibility in mind that this article scrutinises the NSW Senior Secondary English syllabus for the student outcomes it produces, the myth of meritocracy that we believe it perpetuates and the diversity (or lack thereof) of cultures that students are exposed to through its prescribed texts.

The first sections of our article draw on statistical data to establish a 'curriculum

hierarchy' in which matriculation into tertiary education is facilitated for metropolitan students studying privileged versions of subject English in high-SES areas; students in rural, regional and/or remote parts of NSW are shown to suffer from a related and comparable disadvantage that makes their matriculation more challenging. The article then goes on to sketch a sociocultural capital that is present in subject English in NSW, expressly literary in character and concentrated in texts prescribed for the privileged versions of subject English. In the final sections of the article, these text prescriptions are examined further in order to reveal how they marginalise and distort depictions of rurality, and reinforce the curriculum hierarchy and sociospatial disadvantage established in the first sections.

Ultimately, the aim of this article is to reveal the implications of choices made in the construction of the NSW Senior Secondary English syllabus, particularly for those who live, teach and learn in rural settings. We do this in the interest of rural-regional sustainability (Green, 2015), a term that we employ with reference to precarious rural communities as well as to self-identified rural cultures and identities. Using the concept of rural-regional sustainability (Green, 2015), we argue for the valuing, and continuation, of rural cultures and the social and economic development of rural communities through education that facilitates matriculation. This, in turn, will enable the expertise that underpins this social and economic development, such as the training of teachers, health workers and other professionals who live and work in rural communities.

The Senior Secondary English curriculum hierarchy in NSW

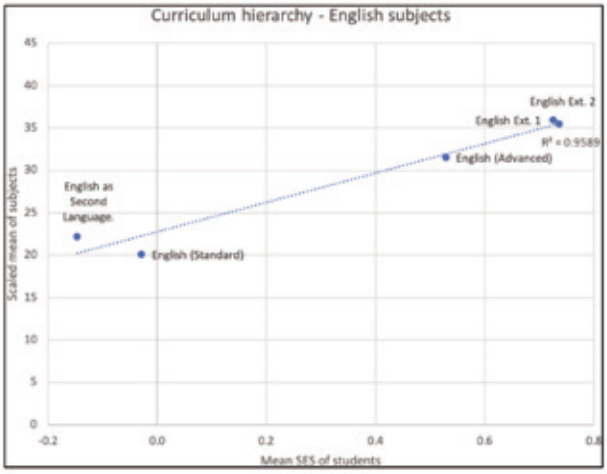
In developing a profile of Senior Secondary English in NSW, we draw upon a previously published analysis and an original bespoke analysis of administrative data for the 2017 HSC cohort. In this work, Green et al. (2023) illustrate that the NSW Senior Secondary English syllabus establishes a 'curriculum hierarchy' in which more powerful and prestigious subjects are typically studied by students from high-SES backgrounds, and these subjects have a higher scaled mean for the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). As such, they are powerful in facilitating matriculation into higher education, and are mostly studied by the socially advantaged – particularly by those attending high-SES schools in greater Sydney. The corollary to this is that subjects providing less power for matriculation are typically studied by students from less advantaged backgrounds, attending schools with a lower-average SES and schools that in most cases exist beyond the greater Sydney limits. The findings revealed by Roberts et al. (1999) echo those of Teese (2000) two decades earlier, although that study focused on Victoria rather than New South Wales. Together they reinforce the point that the current system works against the interests of rural communities by limiting access to university education and the training of future professionals from these regions.

When considering the implications of this curriculum hierarchy for subject English, Green et al. (2023) draw upon the same student-level data to indicate that Senior Secondary English (elsewhere referred to as English Stage 6) in NSW exists on its own social hierarchy (Figure 1). At Stage 6, English is separable into four different courses, each of which reveals distinct characteristics expressed in an overarching description and through text prescriptions. English 'Standard' is designed for students with a diverse range of literacy skills, and it includes a comparably diverse range of texts chosen to appeal to an inclusive classroom; English 'Advanced' and English 'Extension' are intended for 'the brightest … students' (Hughes, 2019, p. 151), those considered capable of engaging regularly with 'challenging' texts and 'complex' ideas, to borrow two of the designations employed by curriculum documents (NESA, 2017); English EAL/D exists for students who have been educated in Australia for five years or fewer, and its text prescriptions attempt to establish a comparable inclusivity and diversity to that characterising the English 'Standard' course. Within these four distinct versions of subject English, Green et al. (2023) consider that the English Advanced and English Extension subjects occupy a position of privilege, at least insofar as they have a higher scaled mean and are studied by students from higher SES backgrounds than those attempting English Standard and English EAL/D. It is true that a fifth course – English Studies – exists within the Stage 6 version of the subject, but it is not included in the hierarchy, as at the time of Green et al.'s (2023) study it was not an examined subject, despite analysis showing that it was studied by the lowest SES cohort of students undertaking subject English at the Stage 6 level. In presenting this English curriculum hierarchy, Green et al. (2023) emphasise a gradient of social and cultural capital underpinning the different

'levels' of HSC English within its established hierarchy. Furthermore, their analysis shows that the English Advanced and Extension subjects, with their higher-SES cohorts, also achieved higher HSC marks, and that the students within the higher-SES cohorts benefited from having a greater proportion of tertiary-educated and professional parents. Interestingly, a higher proportion of students within the higher-SES cohorts for English Advanced and Extension identified as female, and Green et al. (2023) demonstrated that the subjects were more likely to be studied in schools containing higher-SES cohorts. It is important to reinforce here that these patterns of social advantage operate within, and across, schools and sectors, and, while mediated by school level advantage, are dominated by individual student characteristics.

Figure 1

Scaled mean of HSC/ATAR-related English subjects by mean SES of students. From Green et al. (2023).



Turning to Senior Secondary English in rural NSW specifically, Green et al. (2023) illustrate that the proportion of students studying the more 'powerful' English subjects in rural areas is less, and reduces further in direct proportion to how rural and remote a student's location is (Figure 2 below: see Green et al., 2023, p. 8). Notably, only 21% of students in outer regional, remote or very remote locations study English Advanced, with a further 5% studying English Extension, compared to 40% and 11% respectively in greater Sydney. Furthermore, a quarter of students in outer regional, remote or very remote locations studied the non-award (as in 2017) English Studies compared to 13% in greater Sydney. Access to the more powerful English Advanced and Extension offerings is further complicated by these subjects not being offered at all in some rural, regional or remote (RRR) schools (Dean et al., 2021), with this more likely to be the case in schools with a higher proportion of Indigenous student enrolment (Dean & Roberts, 2021). We note the dynamic between student choice and school subject offering, where students may not indicate a preference to study the more powerful versions of the subject. However, we also recognise that this choice is influenced by several factors: school staffing limitations; the number of students needed to form a viable subject offering; the advice students receive about subject choices (itself influenced by the perceived relevance of a subject to students' futures); and students' common desire to experience learning in a class of their peers. These factors can all work to constrain a student's preferred choice of English subject, or force them to engage via the potentially isolating means of distance education.

Distance education offerings are included in the analysis referred to here, though the analysis indicates that where this is an option, it has not been taken up. Together, these patterns of study clearly indicate a significant disengagement with subject English by Senior Secondary students in RRR NSW, and they prompt challenging questions about how these students regard the value of a compulsory subject to the achievement of an HSC, or its relevance to life after formal education has ended.

Figure 2

Percentage of students from specific regions participating in each English subject. From Green et al. (2023).

	Outer-regional/remote/very remote areas.	Inner-regional areas	Major cities
English Standard	49%	49%	44%
English Advanced	21%	29%	40%
English Studies	25%	19%	13%
English Extension 1	3%	5%	8%
English Extension 2	2%	3%	3%
English as a Second Language	0%	0.5%	3%

Further complicating student engagement with subject English is an additional structural disadvantage in the HSC, identified by Dean et al. (2023). Using a matched study approach, where student characteristics of gender, Indigenous status, parental SES, school SES and sector for the sample were matched to control for their influence on the outcome variable of marks, Dean et al. (2023) revealed that RRR students are still at a disadvantage. Specifically, the HSC marks for inner regional students were –1.5 less per unit for English Advanced and –1.6 less per unit for English Standard (p

< 0.001) than the HSC marks for students in greater Sydney, and –1.4 less and –1.7 less per unit ($p < 0.001$) respectively for students in outer regional, remote and very remote areas. While we will examine these results further below, it is important to recognise here that they suggest a form of cultural capital bias in the HSC examination for these students.

The rural cohort (2017)

We now turn to a bespoke analysis of the rural student cohort from the studies cited above. In using 'rural' in this analysis, we are collectively referencing the inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote statistical categories of the Australian Statistical Geography Standard 2018 (ABS, 2018) unless otherwise noted. The 'rural' designation relates to the residential address of the student and/or the school they are enrolled in, as is relevant to the analysis being discussed. This analysis draws upon the same student-level dataset developed by the research team (i.e., Roberts & Dean) from NESA data on schools, courses and students. The dataset comprises 72,615 students and 772 secondary schools located in NSW in 2017. In this analysis, the major city category (which in NSW includes Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong) of schools, hereafter referred to as 'city', was excluded. Data are examined under University of Canberra Human Ethics approval number 20170077 and are used with permission from NESA.

The results of the rural-specific sample largely extend the overall analysis reported in Green et al. (2023), while reinforcing the operation of the subject hierarchy within rural NSW schools. Figure 3 illustrates that student SES is strongly associated with the form of subject English they undertake: English Studies, English Standard, English Advanced or, relatedly, the English Extension offerings. The mean HSC mark for English Advanced is, for example, higher than that for English Standard; the data underlying this also indicates that students in government schools are more likely to undertake English Studies and less likely to undertake English Advanced or the English Extension than those in Catholic or Independent schools. Similarly, students in inner regional locations are more likely to study English Extension than those in outer regional areas, with few students in remote or very remote locations choosing this more 'powerful' version of the subject (see Figure 2 above). As less than 1% of students were studying English EAL/D, the subject was not included here. Low enrolment into this form of subject English may well have been influenced by subject offerings within schools and the availability of qualified or experienced teachers, but it may also indicate something of the social composition of rural areas.

Figure 3

Scaled mean of actual HSC marks in English subjects by mean SES of rural students in 2017.

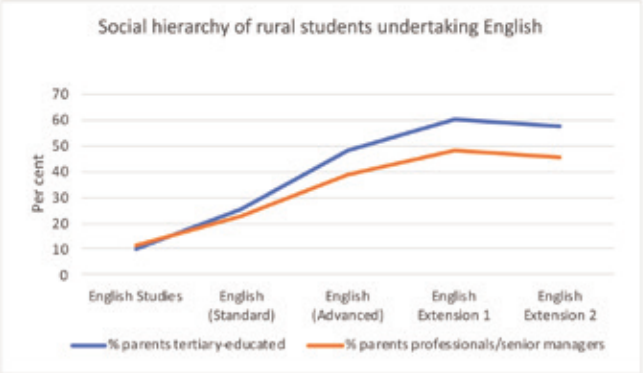
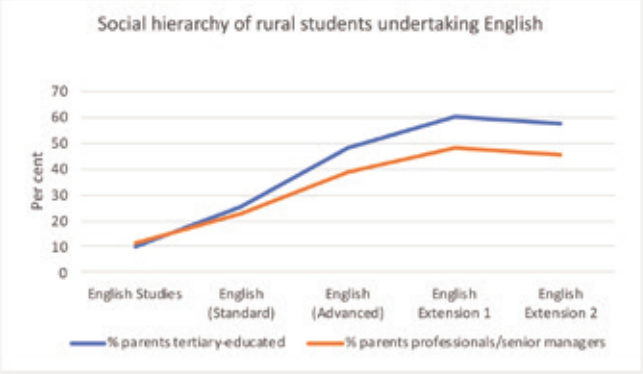


Figure 4 reinforces the family backgrounds of students in each version of subject English at the senior secondary level, thus identifying the 'social hierarchy', or social and cultural capital that students bring with them to school. The significant relationship between tertiary-educated parents and parents in professional or managerial employment (itself associated with the divide between English Standard and English Advanced and Extension) is also significant. When considered against the general social context of rural areas, where tertiary-educated and professional or managerial adults are underrepresented compared to the context of greater Sydney, it would seem there is significant work to do in overcoming entrenched class dispositions to facilitate social mobility. On top of the class divide, gender stereotypes perpetuating the belief that girls are better suited to literature-focused subjects than boys

Figure 4

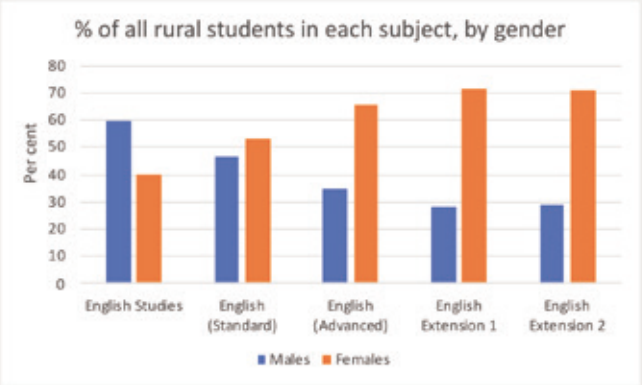
Social Hierarchy of English subjects (rural students) 2017



are also concerningly strong, as is represented in Figure 5. Significantly, the gender differences in participation (particularly in English Advanced and Extension 1) are much more significant than the overall enrolment, as they include greater Sydney students, as reported by Green et al. (2023).

Figure 5

Gender breakdown of rural students enrolled in English subjects in 2017



The above survey of Senior Secondary English in NSW, itself echoing Teese's (2000) analysis, indicates that something is not quite right with Senior Secondary subject English in rural areas – or perhaps that all is progressing well in a project of cultural erasure in favour of a form of civic cosmopolitanism. We acknowledge the influence of literary culture on Senior Secondary English, as explored by Green et al. (2023), and the long history of work related to class and culture in education by the likes of Raewyn Connell, Michael Apple and Pierre Bourdieu, but we also note that the particulars of rurality are often overlooked in Australian research (Roberts et al., 2022) just as they are underrepresented in subject-disciplinary content, of which more later. We also acknowledge the influence of perennial challenges such as teacher shortages, the ongoing difficulties of equitable outcomes in rural schools and the fact that student SES is overly related to educational outcomes in Australia. Rather than revisit topics that others are better suited to explore, the remainder of this paper aims to explore two intersecting lines of thought: the ways in which the hierarchy of subject English is enacted through the cultural capital of text prescriptions, with particular emphasis on that most canonical and well-represented of authors, William Shakespeare, and the consequent representation (or marginalisation) of the rural in those same text prescriptions.

Literature and literary ideology in the Senior Secondary English Prescriptions

So far, this article has drawn on quantitative data sources (i.e., mean ATAR, mean SES, mean HSC results) and analyses of these sources to recognise the presence of a hierarchy in the NSW Senior Secondary English curriculum – one in which Advanced and Extension options are strongly associated with higher-SES areas of greater Sydney. This curriculum hierarchy has been shown to reflect a corresponding social hierarchy that disadvantages RRR students elsewhere in the state. We have also drawn on the work of others (Green et al., 2023) to adumbrate a cultural capital in the Advanced and Extension English courses, and to make the claim that this capital is recognisably 'literary' in character. To examine this claim more closely, our focus now shifts to the 2019–2025 English Stage 6 Prescriptions, a document authored by NESA which summarises the differences between its four English courses. Our aim is to reinforce claims made above about literary cultural capital by identifying this document's locus and salient characteristics, as well as to recognise what its inclusions effectively exclude: namely, depictions of rural, regional and remote Australia that are authentic and positive.

The English Stage 6 Prescriptions document makes clear that all of its courses and modules must expose students to different text-types that include 'a wide range of cultural, social and gender perspectives' (NESA, 2017); engaging with these texts must also engage students in both receptive (listening, reading) and productive (speaking, writing) modes. The selection of texts must include representation of the peoples and cultures of Asia ('Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia' is one of the Australian Curriculum's three stated priorities) as well as texts by, and representative of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (another cross-curricular priority). So far, so varied and inclusive. It appears, however, that the third cross-curricular priority of 'Sustainability' is not seen as salient in the stated requirements for English Stage 6 – an absence elaborated on later in this paper with reference to depictions of the regional and remote in prescribed texts. Notably, however, both the Standard and Advanced courses signal the importance of 'texts which are widely regarded as quality literature' (NESA, 2017). It is this latter statement that we choose to tease out a little here, the better to clarify what is meant by 'quality literature' and to consider the extent of its 'wide regard'. Our aim is to expose the shakiness

of foundational beliefs informing such terms, the priorities they lead to and the assumptions and privilege they carry. We will then highlight how this framing marginalises representations of the rural and misses an opportunity to contribute to rural-regional sustainability by effectively erasing and devaluing rural cultures, and limiting community futures by limiting the matriculation opportunities required for social and economic development.

To begin with the belief that subject English is expressly 'literary' in orientation, we note that this is something reinforced in NESA's Subject Content Knowledge Requirements, a sister document to the Prescriptions which outlines the prior study necessary to gain accreditation as a teacher in NSW. The stated requirements for Secondary English emphasise 'a strong core of textual studies including literature' (NESA, 2018), with study in communications, creative writing, linguistics, media/film studies and the performing arts rendered lesser contributors to the subject – side dishes, in effect, to the main course of literature. While it is true that 'literature' is one of the three named 'strands' of the Australian Curriculum for English (the other two are 'literacy' and 'language': see ACARA, 2022), and so something justifiably prioritised in any English course, there is persuasive evidence to suggest that no consistent body of 'literary knowledge' within subject English actually exists – at least not in the stable terms that the phrases 'strong core' and 'wide regard' assume (McLean Davies et al. 2022; McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018). As Green et al. (2023) put it, 'English teaching in NSW … is organised by what has been called "literary ideology", to be understood as a complex, contradictory phenomenon' in which the prescription of set texts acts as 'a proxy for subject-specific knowledge' (p. 1389). As far back as the 1975 'Bullock' report on education in England, it was argued that '[i]t is characteristic of English that it does not hold together as a body of knowledge which can be identified, quantified, then transmitted' (DES, 1975, p. 5), and a wealth of academic writing since has considered that what was true in 1975 is at least as true in 2024: 'the knowledge gained in English is at once broader, more individualised and more permeable than policy-makers assume' (Driver, 2023, p. 98).

It is when considering the differences between English Standard and English Advanced that a manifest preference for the 'literary' – especially for canonical literature celebrated by a 'Cultural Heritage' model of the discipline – emerges (Macken-Horarik, 2014; Quin & Driver, 2020). Three of English Standard's four modules of study include a mandatory 'prose fiction' text, an option for a 'poetry OR drama' text and a 'nonfiction OR film OR media' text. Such increasingly loose prescriptions imply taxonomised levels of literary significance, with the required prose fiction on the top shelf and a jumble-sale box of nonfiction, film and media cluttered together at the bottom. It is a hierarchy that echoes NESA's emphasis on literature over media, film studies and the performing arts in its Subject Content Knowledge Requirements for Secondary English teachers; it also matches the subject hierarchy examined in the first sections of this article. In the English Standard course, 'Module B: Close Study of Literature' places the strongest emphasis on literary knowledge: 'understanding, knowledge and appreciation of a substantial literary text' is its first stated aim. In this context, we might consider 'substantial' to be synonymous with 'texts which are widely regarded as quality literature'.

It is only fair to acknowledge that the broader scope and sequence of English Standard's prescribed texts do much to fulfil the promise of a spectrum of 'world' literature, exposing students to a genuine diversity of cultures, practices, beliefs and perspectives. Even within its first module, however, the prescriptions differentiate between two types of play text: 'drama (D)' and 'Shakespearean drama (S)' – a categorisation that may not be intended as hierarchical, but which nonetheless marks Shakespeare's work out as distinct from that of all other playwrights (NESA, 2017).

English Advanced places a greater emphasis on 'higher-order thinking', 'critical and creative skills' and 'academic achievement' among its outcomes (NESA, 2017), and it increases exposure to recognisably 'literary' texts as a means of achieving them. This includes a greater volume of texts overall: four, rather than three, selections must be made for each module undertaken. There is also a clear focus on – and a requirement for – Shakespeare, that most canonical of literary figures. Shakespeare is the only author who must be taught and learned in English Advanced, and where choices are provided elsewhere they are often skewed towards other canonical authors (Austen, Dickens, Woolf and Kafka, for example, are prominent in the 'prose fiction' category). There are also additional options for studying Shakespeare outside of the required 'Shakespearean drama' texts in each module. As Green et al. (2023) summarise it, 'It is not that pre-twentieth-century texts dominated Advanced … but rather, where

they did exist, it was rarely in Standard and never in ESL'. For better or worse, an ideology in which the most 'literary' literature is the most valued content in subject English is enacted within the Stage 6 Prescriptions, and this literary content is localised almost exclusively in the English Advanced and English Extension courses that our study shows are more accessible to high-SES students in the greater Sydney area. To make the same point a different way, we might say that because the Advanced and Extension courses are conceived as a 'provision for the brightest and most capable students' (Hughes 2019, p. 151), their concentration on 'literary' literature reifies this content as something exclusive – the perk of a VIP area of English demarcated by a geographical velvet rope.

Attempts have been made in the past to defend canonical or 'literary' literature as an 'entitlement for all' (Bishop, 2012; Newbolt, 1921; Tickle, 2013), but there are reasons to question the extent to which this entitlement is provided equally across both NSW and its Senior Secondary English syllabus. Green et al. (2023) ask why, 'If the intention is to "democratise" the canon across all versions of subject English … [is it] over-represented in extension and advanced versions … [and] from a perspective that is closest to "cultural heritage"' (p. 1382)? Given the limitations RRR students experience in accessing English Advanced and English Extension, claims made about literature as an entitlement for all appear specious: they promote the myth of meritocracy acknowledged at the outset of this article. Other models of subject English (e.g. 'critical literacy') may be said to work more democratically, levelling the literary playing-field by questioning the canon – exposing students to 'great' literature, yes, but in ways that acknowledge how every inclusion implies a corresponding exclusion (Macken-Horarik, 2014; Quin & Driver, 2020). Between 2019 and 2023 a set of 'Annotations' was developed by NESA with the aim of clarifying what is meant by 'widely-regarded quality literature', seeming to make transparent how texts earn this designation and what their educative outcomes and associated pedagogies should aspire to (NESA, 2017). Curiously, though, none of the annotations clarify why Shakespeare is the most prominent (and the only mandatory) author in the Stage 6 Prescriptions, nor how his plays should be taught; instead, they work to justify the selection of twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts only. These annotations may have been made with the aim of assisting teachers who are less familiar with more recent authors than they are with the ubiquitous Shakespeare, but it is concerning that this approach assumes a teacher's familiarity with the only 'required reading' of the Stage 6 syllabus, as well as how and why to teach it. To refer back to a claim made above, this assumption is not easily distinguishable from a 'cultural capital' more readily available to those in high-SES metropolitan areas of greater Sydney than to those in RRR areas, in which the Stage 6 Prescriptions still apply. If the students undertaking English Advanced and Extension are, by and large, the children of tertiary-educated parents who themselves experienced a similar education, the more likely it is that its literary culture remains a form of cultural capital localised in high-SES areas.

Who do the prescribed texts reflect?

If an ideology that venerates literature as a civilising or moralising influence and a 'source of pleasure and personal edification' (Green et al., 2023, p. 1390) provides the core belief towards which the courses and modules of Senior Secondary English aspire, it would appear reasonable to examine this belief's validity and effectiveness. The section above expressed doubt over how robust the literary ideology of the Stage 6 syllabus is, and questioned the extent to which the ideology is equitable or accessible, particularly for RRR students. This section of our article considers the question a little further, using an empirical approach: if we compare the different English courses to each other, examining their prescribed texts, what might this reveal about who those texts reflect, or whose interests they represent?

So far, this article has been silent about whether the privileging of literature in Stage 6 English does, or should, include a substantial emphasis on Australian literature, or whether the significance of William Shakespeare suggests parochial deference towards an anglophilic Western canon. Few would disagree that Australian stories play an important role in helping us to understand our past and create our future (McLean Davies et al., 2022), but the question of an 'Australian literature' enshrined in school syllabuses is vexed for various reasons. Does such a prospect risk stirring nationalist tendencies by establishing a colonial/colonialist portrait of the Australian character (Patterson, 2012)? How would the 2019–2025 Stage 6 Prescriptions do justice to our postcolonial heterogeneity, including the marginalised voices of women, immigrants and the multitude of Indigenous cultures all deserving of representation in an already-crowded curriculum? For these (and other) reasons,

the focus of this article needs must limit the extent to which this can of worms is opened, although an acknowledgement of our argument's implications within a wider consideration of Australian literature deserves to be made, even if it takes the form of an apologia such as this.

What we can also acknowledge is that, within English Standard, there is a clear attempt to represent a diverse range of human experiences, presumably so that students from all walks of life can enjoy the validation of their language, culture and people even as they are exposed to quite different versions of English usage, different cultures and different values. To restate the metaphor established at the outset of this article and present in its title, some texts act as mirrors for self-reflection while others open windows to different worlds. The first two modules in English Standard are quite explicit about this, linking 'Text and Human Experiences' through a subsequent study of how 'Language, Identity and Culture' interrelate. Indigenous and Asian voices are prominent, and there are roughly equal numbers of male- and female-authored texts. This last point may be significant bearing in mind data that identifies a roughly equal number of male and female students going on to complete English Standard (see Figure 5 above).

Once again, though, the 'Close Study of Literature' module shifts the ideological focus of English Standard towards the appreciation of canonical texts as self-enclosed objects. This might be theoretically justifiable on the basis of a Cultural Heritage or New Critical approach to literature (Driver, 2017), but one effect of this focus is to tip the gender balance of authorship towards the male: only male authors are identified in the module's 'prose fiction' category, three males and one female appear in the 'Poetry OR drama' section, and two males and one female in the options provided for 'nonfiction OR film OR media'. This is a shift that grows more pronounced in the modules for English Advanced. 'Textual Conversations' – a module centred around the concept of comparative literature – could be said to unbalance its comparisons, weighing eight male authors against five females on its metaphorical scales. 'Critical Study of Literature' exacerbates the imbalance, offering students two female authors to the module's ten males. This is not to say that equal portions of male and female authorship constitute the perfect recipe for literature's educative potential, still less that female or male authors are limited imaginatively to representations of their own gender. Shakespeare, for one, is frequently celebrated for the depth and substance of his female characters (Driver, 2022; Driver & Hewes, 2023). Nor is it the case that students need or want a perfect reflection of themselves in every book they read: characters and ideas that illuminate, move and provoke are what count. That said, it is notable that the gender balance of authorship tips noticeably towards the male in an English course that attracts nearly 30% more female students than male (Figure 5). This statistic grows more pronounced in English Extension, where the proportion of female to male students is roughly double (Figure 5). In broad terms, then, academic eyebrows might raise in response to courses of study that are increasingly dominated by female students but which are founded on a literary ideology venerating dead white males. It is also a cause of potential concern given that all the courses in question include 'a wide range of … gender perspectives' among the experiences that 'texts **must** give students' (NESA's bold text) (NESA, 2017). This is not a concern lost on the students of St Clare's College Waverly, who in 2023 contemplated how their HSC English essays might have been different had they been able to respond to the voices and experiences of female authors (Harris, 2023).

Teese (2000) remains sceptical about whether female students are disadvantaged by the scope and sequence of English Advanced, arguing that 'the real question is not whether girls as a group or boys as a group are more disadvantaged, but [instead] which girls and which boys?' (p. 109). He goes on to argue that students in the 'rural hinterlands' of NSW are the group most disadvantaged by the literary framing of subject English, regardless of gender (Teese, 2000), a claim that we also recognise above. Given our consensus with Teese (2000) on this point, and our recognition that a broader consideration of the place of Australian literature within text prescriptions is beyond the scope of this study, we choose to focus the remainder of this article's analysis on the extent to which rural and/or regional voices number among the 'wide range of cultural, social and gender perspectives' provided in the Senior Secondary English Prescriptions, particularly within the 'powerful' English Advanced and Extension courses.

Reflections of the rural

Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) open their book *Teaching English in rural communities* with the intent 'to help English teachers develop equity-oriented

pedagogical practices that both address broad cultural discourses of rurality and respond to the local rural contexts in which they teach' (p. 4). The rural contexts they acknowledge are experienced as distinct – even unique – cultures that are produced 'in place' at the intersection of social, cultural, and geographical dimensions of the lived human experience (Green & Corbett, 2013; Roberts et al., 2022). We support Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen's (2021) claim that rurality incorporates much more than a statistical categorisation of location and demographic variables. We also concur that statistical designations frequently have the effect of placing rurality in deficit when its variables are set against an implied or imagined metropolitan norm – one that, ironically, is used in the above analysis, as it is in all analyses of Australian schooling. Indeed, the lived rurality that we recognise is often overlooked in educational research (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021), something that this edition of *Australian Journal of English Education*, work elsewhere related to 'rural literacies' and recent books such as that of Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) all aim to address.

Beyond problematic statistical measures, however, the characteristics of the rural are difficult to define succinctly or in ways that are universally applicable (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021; Roberts et al., 2022). Any attempt to encapsulate the lived experience of rurality in a sentence or two would, we consider, risk taking a reductive approach comparable to those we criticise above and below. A reader of this article who identifies as rural will bring a unique place-based understanding of what the term means for their identity and the context in which it was formed or sustained; we do not wish to risk alienating this reader by establishing a definition of rurality they may find to be partial, superficial or wrong. For our purposes, though, we agree with Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen's (2021) position that rurality is a social construct that is both ascribed by others and self-identified on the basis of intersecting locational, social and cultural characteristics. Typically, these characteristics are related to locations beyond large centres, with lifestyles, economies and cultures that are often linked to agriculture, resource extraction or environmental tourism. Beyond these broad characteristics, we also understand rural to be a collective term for non-metropolitan locations frequently designated as 'regional', 'remote' and/or 'country'.

Work on 'rural literacies' (e.g., Donehower et al., 2007; Green & Corbett, 2013) has made a significant contribution to understanding that the rural is experienced by individuals as a distinct culture – one based upon a rural habitus produced through particular social and cultural capitals, traditions, culture and literature (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). These representations and their associated knowledges are too often marginalised or ignored in the Australian Curriculum, as they are in the assessment practices of subject English, which favour more metrocentric approaches and constructions of literacy (Green & Corbett, 2013). While literacy is, of course, distinct from subject English, one example of assessment practices which reinforce spatial inequity is the Australian National Assessment – Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). This is one measure through which rural students (and their teachers and schools) are annually reminded (*sic*) of their disadvantage due to their typically being below the national averages for a range of literacy skills. However, through a randomised controlled trial that used questions modified by a local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group in NSW, Dobrescu et al. (2021) showed that the cultural context of questions has a significant impact on performance in standardised reading tests in NSW schools. Specifically, this randomised controlled trial showed that making texts and questions contextually relevant reduced the rural–urban gap by 33% and reduced the Indigenous–non-Indigenous gap by 50% (Dobrescu et al., 2021).

Exactly how social and cultural capitals and the cultural assumptions of the Australian Curriculum intersect with rurality is something requiring a sustained study that is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we will limit our engagement to the representation of the rural in Australian literature in two ways: first, through an examination of the representation of the rural in the 2019–2025 English Stage 6 Prescriptions; and second, through a wider consideration of the rural in popular culture. For rural cultures to be valued and sustained, we believe that they first need to be visible in popular culture and represented in curriculums in positive and productive ways.

Writing from the United States of America, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021,) note that

> while some canonical novels are set in rural contexts, albeit past/historic settings, and focus on rural characters (e.g., *Of Mice and Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*), rarely is rural itself a point of focus – and if so, even more rarely in any flattering way. In fact, continuously offering portrayals of rural as primarily historic has the potential to further facilitate a rendering of rural as something

> from the past and not pertinent in the present or future. (p. 6)

Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) go on to note the negative stereotypes of rural communities that typically pervade popular and literary culture. This observation rings lamentably true for texts in the 2019–2025 English Stage 6 Prescriptions – indeed, we are not able to identify any texts that engage with the rural as a lived space in this document. One text, Julia Leigh's *The Hunter* (1989), uses the Tasmanian wilderness as the setting for a form of danger that is linked to certain mythical qualities, but we consider that such an approach reproduces the trope of rural landscapes in settler-colonial societies discussed above. It would seem as though the rural is largely ignored, if not actively erased, in fictional texts employed for educational purposes, or at least those employed in Senior Secondary contexts in NSW. Where the rural is present in these, it is depicted as a mythical 'endzone' at the remote borders of the imagination – one 'othered' by the text in a way that works against its existence as a real place constituting a core aspect of many students' identities.

Over the last decade, literature and cinematography in Australia and the United States have both contributed to the othering of the rural as part of the rise of an 'outback noir' subgenre. Drawing on traditions established by the 1961 novel *Wake in Fright* (also a 1971 film) and present in recent examples such *Wolf Creek*, *The Dry* and *Mystery Road*, the outback noir subgenre only gains currency when appealing to a form of popular-culture memory (Rosser, 2013). This typically relates to actual violent crimes and the 'well mapped tradition of settler anxieties of viewing the land as alien and hostile' (Rosser, 2013, p. 73). In *Wolf Creek*, for instance, a psychopathic serial killer is evoked who reminds the viewer of related events at the real 'Wolfe Creek'. The interdependencies of setting, character and plot combine in a film that draws on mythologies of 'place' for its disturbing effect – mythologies that are central to all the examples of the outback noir subgenre identified here (Disher, 2021). Outback noir settings are vast, arid and inhospitable, qualities that cohere in a semi-sentient (and sometimes malign) presence in which space is 'defined in terms of key oppositions; at once a place of adventure and danger, or personal fulfilment and a violent death' (Rosser, 2013, p. 74). A consideration of such content might well contribute to a unit of work on crime fiction within subject English, but the outback noir setting, emergent from popular culture, risks alienating authentic rural communities in which students live and learn as much as it increases perception of rural spaces that are devoid of the qualities of civilised society such as safety, comfort, sophistication – qualities which are, in turn, located either implicitly or explicitly in metropolitan areas in the tropes of popular culture sustaining them. Indeed, protagonists in the outback noir subgenre are typically city-dwellers who are confronted by an alien outback setting and who struggle to engage with its hostile communities or process its long-standing conflicts. Themes, plots and characters such as these send a clear and powerful message about what we choose to value, both in text selections for subject English and in Australian popular culture more generally.

This message, implicit through the absence of the rural and explicit in mythological tropes about it, actively undermines the sustainability of rural cultures, rural values and rural communities. The notion of education for rural-regional sustainability (Green, 2015) is prescient here, as it advocates for a place-conscious approach to education that refocuses educational (curriculum) thinking away from metronormative notions and towards the development of sustainable rural regions and communities. This perspective incorporates the sociocultural aspect of sustainability, and it includes a concern for the future of rural places and their cultures. Such concern is inherently just insofar as it values sociocultural diversity, and it is necessary inasmuch as it aims to safeguard the stewardship of vast tracts of the nation that produce food, fibre and other resources that Australia cannot do without. Indeed, such a perspective is equally important for rural communities as for metropolitan ones (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021), as these representations strike at the heart of how the rural is produced as an imagined space by those who are unfamiliar with it. The near-absence of sustainability connections in the Senior Secondary Prescriptions confirms the belief that sustainability in subject English is not a well-developed priority, even though a sociocultural lens on rural-regional sustainability is something that subject English is uniquely placed to facilitate through representations in, of and for, rural places and cultures.

Conclusion

Statistical analysis of the 2017 NSW HSC cohort illustrates that a concerning pattern of access, participation and achievement exists in the suite of

NSW Senior Secondary English courses, and that this pattern correlates with location, social background and gender. While we cannot account for the decisions students make about their subject choices, or the curricular offerings of schools, we surmise that the implicitly 'literary' culture of subject English, and the ways in which rurality is elided or perverted within it, may be implicated in this decision-making. In proposing this interpretation, we have considered the prescribed texts, the position of rural perspectives in these texts and the mythologies of rural spaces and places that pervade contemporary culture. Anecdotal data suggests that, for many in rural areas, English means 'literacy' and not 'literature' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021; Payton, 2022), an assumption that places the powerful versions of the subject at a distance and compels the inclusion of annotations specific to the teaching of canonical literary texts (e.g., Shakespeare) among curricular resources that support teachers in understanding why texts are prescribed and how to teach them. Furthermore, our examination of the requirements of texts prescribed in courses of Senior Secondary English reveals much about the beliefs and priorities of those who established the 2019–25 English Stage 6 Prescriptions, as does a survey of the texts themselves. Indeed, when the text selections and requirements of English Standard are considered in relation to those of English Advanced (and, to a lesser extent, English EAL/D and English Extension), it may even be said that this set of beliefs and priorities reveals an attendant set of assumptions privileging one version of subject-disciplinary knowledge over others, and serving one type of student more than others – typically, *not* students in an RRR community.

Based on the analysis above, we suggest that the intentions and prescriptions within a stratified and literary Senior Secondary English syllabus contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of rural people, places and communities. While our study is circumscribed by the NSW Senior Secondary Syllabus for English, we suggest that the perspective it takes and the methods it employs provide insights for subject English curriculum that are broadly applicable across all stages of schooling and jurisdictions in which texts are prescribed for study. In response, we advocate for the 'ruraling' (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021) of subject English in the senior years, to make it more inclusive of rural perspectives and depictions at once authentic and positive. These, we believe, would constitute a legitimate means of engagement with Sustainability as a designated Priority of the Australian Curriculum (Green, 2015). Such an approach would allow texts and questions about texts to be more contextually relevant to RRR students, reducing the rural–urban gap in ways identified by Dobrescu above (2021). The popularity and evocative nature of the outback noir subgenre in both subject English and in wider popular culture makes this a particularly challenging task, given the absence of a breadth of literature depicting rural cultures and lives in positive terms. This may indeed be the point – that Senior Secondary English merely reflects our imperfect social values, leaving us to either accept them and continue to perpetuate the marginalisation of the rural, or begin the difficult but critical work of spatial-justice-oriented activism. The moral, ethical and political implications of rural-regional sustainability are imperative, at least when placed within the context of wider social concerns, environmental pressures and school staffing challenges faced by rural regions in the service of their communities. Indeed, it is an imperative for the nation, given rural communities' ability to feed, clothe and provide primary resources for all of Australia.

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Bootstrapping Myths

Rural Senior English Students as 'Aussie Battlers': Bootstrapping Myths in Neoliberal Times

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Abstract: Rural Australian students' minimum literacy levels tend to be three times lower than those of their urban peers, mirroring a broader global issue of rural student underachievement. Despite a wide range of reports recognising this imbalance, the complex educational needs of young rural Australians are not being met, and standardised assessment procedures that purport to be unbiased still reign. This issue is particularly problematic for rural Victorian students in their final two years of secondary school, where English is a compulsory subject and could determine 25% of their entry marks for tertiary and higher education. This paper explores the experiences of a small group of senior rural students[1] in the English component of the Victorian Certificate of Education. The study[2] foregrounds the voices of these rural students and examines the challenging positioning that occurs when the complexities of rural spaces are misrecognised and abstracted by dominant groups. My analysis suggests that these rural students perceive themselves as 'Aussie battlers'. This was a subject position linked to a particular discourse: a narrative taken up and negotiated by the students as they endeavoured to adapt to the language demands of the senior English subject, even though this leaves little room for their own ways of knowing and being as language users. I argue that this is a result of neoliberal nurturing of bootstrap-style myths in education that contribute to inequity and work to perpetuate institutionally maintained power.

Keywords: English, rural education, dominant discourse, Neoliberalism, Literacy, NAPLAN, standardised assessment, Victorian Certificate of Education

Introduction

As a rural English teacher, I am constantly reminded of the conflict between my students' home and out-of-school lives and the literacy demands of school, particularly the kinds of academic literacy and language practices they encounter in senior English classes. In rural classrooms, students are immersed in school-language environments – powerful discourses based on linguistic choices recognised by others as appropriate for formal learning (Flynn, 2011; Gee, 2001). Invariably, many of my students wrestle with the tension between home and classroom discourses. Some manage to move quite seamlessly across this divide, while others find it difficult to shift between discourses of rural family life and the more abstract language demands of senior English classrooms. Both inside the English classroom and during out-of-school interactions, I often consider the ways in which rural students are shaped by their experiences in subject English – the way their home discourses might be rejected, or at least rarely accommodated, by mandated assessments and dominant classroom discourses.

This conflict between worlds emerges statistically, where literacy-related results from both National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests and senior school examinations indicate a widening gap between the urban and the rural (Goss & Sonneman, 2016; Halsey, 2017; Polesel et al., 2021; Roberts & Guenther, 2021). Although NAPLAN results do not contribute directly to senior school English exam performance, the national testing program plays a significant role in how English is taught until Year 9, and NAPLAN figures are widely publicised, thus impacting the way the gap is perceived by a wide audience. Indeed,

NAPLAN results indicate that more than 50% of remote students perform below the national minimum literacy standard (McGaw et al., 2020). These figures, although crude, hint at a complex picture of rural student literacy experience (Roberts & Green, 2013; Smith et al., 2019; Thomson, 2000).

While subject English has traditionally played a central role in Australian schooling, it has always been a highly contested subject and in a constant state of review (Beavis, 2018; Patterson, 2002). In Victoria, the study of English is compulsory, and while there are four English subjects available for study[4] in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), 'standard' English – the subject under consideration here – is the most popular of these. The VCE is a competitive, high-stakes two-year certification program for senior secondary students. Since its establishment in 1990, VCE English has been a central element of the overall senior school qualification, accounting for a quarter of all students' Australian Tertiary Admissions Rankings (ATAR)[5].

This paper explores my research with a small group of senior rural students and their experiences in relation to the formal language demands within VCE English. Foregrounding the voices of these rural students, it considers the positioning that occurs when dominant groups such as the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) operate to privilege certain discourses and literacy practices in their examination grading (Anson, 2017) and the ways in which this operation perpetuates institutionally maintained power (Janks, 2010; Rose, 2011). By drawing on my own perspectives as an ethnographic insider, I seek to understand the rural from within – 'to take the rural's own forces seriously – to go from viewing the rural to being-in-the-rural' (Halfacree, 2009, p. 453). This requires an acknowledgement of the ways in which colonial bush nostalgia and neoliberal ideology, as forces, perpetuate the bootstrap-style myth of the 'Aussie battler'.

In the following sections I first outline a way of perceiving the rural as both real and imagined in order to problematise the idea of ruralities as homogenised spaces. I explore the role of colonial myths and consider how dominant narratives such as the 'Aussie battler' have helped cultivate an idealised rurality. Moving then to literacy and subject English, I outline some of the impacts of standardised testing, public reporting on student results and notions of educational 'excellence'. I then consider how these elements may shape rural students' experiences of subject English. Finally, I discuss indicative examples from the data that illustrate the ways 'Aussie battler' identities are adopted by these students as they negotiate the demands of VCE English.

Understanding the rural differently

In this study, I sought various key qualities in conceptualising and defining the rural. Just as I wanted to see beyond the idea of students as quantifiable tables of data, my main emphasis was on the need to see beyond notions of the rural as simply being related to population figures or distance from urban spaces. Acknowledging the complexity and nuance of rural spaces helps reveal the rich life-worlds that exist within rural communities (Bourke & Lockie, 2001; Coladarci, 2007).

Following Soja (1996), the rural can be understood as space which is both 'real-and-imaginary' (Green & Corbett, 2013, p. 19). It is where a sense of geographical place (the real) is understood as unique, valued and respected, but it is also emotionally and socially coded (the imaginary) and variously seen as a place of hope, security and trust alongside uncertainty and fear (Hibbert, 2013). Depending on one's perspective – from within or without, or somewhere in between – how we see the rural, what combination of 'real-and-imaginary' we hold to, has implications when it comes to researching the rural. In my research, this required an investigation into both the real-and-imagined conjuring of 'out of the way' (Kenway et al., 2006, p. 57) places and the various understandings, some mythical and some stereotypical, we hold of the rural (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Common misconceptions – often the perspectives of those from 'without' – imagine the rural positively as a natural place of peaceful nostalgia and security, escape, long-held beliefs, sanitised heritages and a sense of community while simultaneously conjuring images of terror, uncanny wilderness and lack of civilisation and control (Bell, 2006; Mormont, 1987). These different social representations, in some ways, attempt to provide us with a universal rural meaning; yet despite being 'misplaced' or 'distorted' (Halfacree, 1993, p. 32) images of the rural, they still foster, produce and reproduce very real sociocultural effects.

In Australia, for example, Green and Letts (2007) note the influence of enduring and complex notions of 'Australianness' and the stereotypical, colonial Australian character (see also Roberts & Green, 2013).

From an historical, Eurocentric viewpoint, this person is an 'other' – an antipodean. Fabled as a grotesque place inhabited by ferocious monsters, Australia and its colonial myths have worked to inscribe ruralities with various narratives that emphasise a very particular national identity. These early 'bush' myths fostered generations of stories that have subsequently woven themselves into the collective consciousness, shaping the development of the colonial nation and strongly mediating both the way Australians have come to regard themselves and how they are viewed by others (Green & Letts, 2007).

It is important to note that such constructions are not neutral or value-free, and are often hierarchical products which posit the urban as greater and the rural as lesser (Berry, 2002; Creed & Ching, 1997). According to Barthes (1957), myth is not naturally occurring but is created by people and based upon human history; it therefore has the potential to shape reality in addition to always carrying some sort of message, thereby forming part of an ideology. Myth does not obscure or reveal the truth; rather, it works to naturalise a concept or belief by altering signs and endowing them with new meanings, which work, consciously or unconsciously, to empower the creators. Myth endures regardless of truth and possible empirical validity. Myth simplifies the world and removes contradictions; it 'abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences' (Barthes, 1957, p. 143). This simplicity then works to convert the unknown to the known – out-of-the-way places come to be understood in certain ways – allocating identities which may alter and devalue the 'lived experience' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 51) of rural people (Downes & Fuqua, 2018). Those who have the power to control and monitor society create these imagined realms – their own representations of space catering to their own ideologies – which are perpetuated and legitimised by dominant narratives of the rural (Bourke & Lockie, 2001). I suggest these idealised views conceptualise the rural as 'abstract space' (Lefebvre, 1991) whereby the dominant and powerful myth creators imagine other places with 'blissful clarity' (Barthes, 1957, p. 143), and thus deny their complexities – in this case, the complexities of ruralities (Reid et al., 2010).

It has been suggested that nostalgic myths are reconstructed visions of the past that are fostered by neoliberal agents and others in order to make the past knowable, thereby turning it into a resource that can be drawn on by individuals working to improve their present and long-term future (Petersson et al., 2007). Since the 1980s, meritocratic, neoliberal discourses of economics, responsibility, enterprise, a risk-laden future and a preoccupation with lifelong learning have entered policy debates about education standards and school funding. These discourses have contributed to feelings of fragmented uncertainty that pose a threat to the neoliberal citizen (Berliner, 2013; Cormack & Comber, 2013). Such discourses, particularly those around risk and responsibility, hint at a neoliberal future with no safety nets or community solidarity, a concern readily ameliorated by 're-memorised solidarity' (Petersson et al., 2007 p. 59) and other nostalgic myths of past troubles being overcome by bravery, resilience and hard yakka (Nile, 2000; Whitman, 2013). Such ideas of nostalgia and myth are important to this study because rural students draw on them, and it is the continued propagation of such myths (in politics, literature, film and social media) that veil systems of inequality and privilege, and craft a model citizen who is at ease with their lot in life (Aitkin, 2005).

This is where myths such as the 'Aussie battler' have arisen – a myth that combines colonial nostalgia and neoliberal ideology to perpetuate the belief that an individual can pull themselves up (socially and economically) 'by their bootstraps', just as long as they remain obedient and honest, work hard and make the most of the opportunities granted to them by education. In terms of this study of rural young people and their experience of senior English, these ideas are useful because of the way such myths contribute to the abstraction of rural space and how rural young people view themselves as students of English.

Subject English-as-literacy

Based on his investigations into subject English and Australian education policy, Sawyer (2005) considers that 'it is difficult to find a definition of subject English that is not couched almost entirely in terms of literacy' (p. 11). This has led to a new concept, labelled by Green (2018) 'English-as-literacy' (p. 169), which is characterised by governmentally prescribed literacy strategies, an ever-expanding program of standardised assessments, and uniformity and outcomes-based curriculum. Such demands for 'neat, orderly and easily digestible tables and graphs of achievement and failure' (Bacalja, 2023, p. 20) have infected subject English with a mechanical, skills-based, limited (and limiting) outlook (Kress, 2002).

I outline these concerns here in order to illustrate

the conflation of English, as a subject-discipline, with literacy as a skill or capability. This conflation is significant because of the role literacy plays in neoliberal ideology, where it is marketed as a desirable, yet simultaneously completely neutral, skill encircled by a system of national testing, standardised curriculum and public reporting which is 'hell-bent on measurement' (Bacalja, 2023, p. 20). Compulsory senior English studies in Victoria are part of this conflation, and are pitched as a common-sense response to societal demands for educational excellence (McLeod, 2012; Popkewitz, 2008). Researchers suggest, however, that these demands are rife with neoliberal notions of student success and the desire to produce students whose literacy values and skills reflect the economy's demand for mobile workers and entrepreneurs (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007; McLeod & Yates, 2006).

English in the Victorian Certificate of Education

There are several inequities associated with VCE English which influence the ways rural students experience the subject. Here, I highlight four key concerns: (1) the inequality of the VCE English system; (2) the mismatch between rural students' primary discourses and those demanded by formal schooling; (3) the knowledge and values required for high scores in assessment tasks and exams; and (4) the ways in which standardised curriculum and assessment practices homogenise students by directing them towards Anglo-centric and middle-class ways of being.

While the VCE aims to provide an equitable curriculum, research indicates achievement across the urban-rural divide is markedly different, with concerns being raised over exclusionary practices and an ideological, government-led curriculum designed only for 'elite' candidates (Anson, 2017, p. 143).

There is also concern over the favouring of middle-class, Anglo-centric values and knowledge, whereby certain types of citizens and dominant readings – chiefly urban, wealthy and white – are given more credence (Anson, 2017). Some researchers even suggest that English classes have become sites 'for the regulation of student consciousness' (Anson, 2020, p. 2), or 'a world of single truths' (Misson, 2006, p. 16), despite the recent push for the study of more diverse texts (Little & Aglinskas, 2022; McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2022). These findings suggest that English text selection, in particular, is a political exercise that perpetuates disparities in achievement. Such an authoritarian approach to VCE English has been criticised as making the subject a 'tool of the state' for the purpose of cultural consecration, which validates and legitimises some cultural interests over others (Bacalja et al., 2023; Horton & McLean Davies, 2022). With an overcrowded curriculum and pressures to achieve sound results, teachers are relying on lecture-style lessons that teach students to merely comply and 'regurgitate' (Kolber, 2022, p. 115) these readings to gain an acceptable mark in their final exam, as opposed to achieving genuine engagement (Boechner, 2018). In this environment, VCE English persists as something that is 'done to' students rather than 'with them' (Bacalja, 2021, p. 83).

The understanding of English being a subject 'done to' students is supported by research suggesting that some rural students' primary discourses are less likely to correspond with discourses of formal schooling, resulting in middling to poor achievement levels (Anson, 2019; Teese & Polesel, 2003). The urban-centric, middle-class language demands of the English classroom, across all years of secondary school but more prominently at senior levels, can alienate students who are tested on language that only other people speak (Macken-Horarik, 2006). If academic literacies are inaccessible to students without these 'required ways of reading, writing and speaking' (Anson, 2020, p. 4) and students are unable to feign middle-class values and Anglo-centric perspectives, then subject English becomes simply a source of exposure of poor skills (Delpit, 1992). These language practices can exclude rural students and create a barrier to tertiary study via the ATAR scoring system (Bacalja & Bliss, 2018; Macdonald, 1995).

The pressure to conform to standardised language practices can be more pronounced in disadvantaged schools where rote learning and skills-based literacies pedagogies are adopted in response to low results on national tests as well as high-stakes examinations (Perelman, 2018). Throughout schooling, English teachers 'teach towards' (Kolber, 2022, p. 112) the VCE, with a focus on 'strangulated' (McGraw & Mason, 2021, p. 8) written assessments under examination conditions. This pressure to perform has led to a reliance on teaching formulaic writing (Kolber, 2022; McKnight, 2020), with students focusing on 'rule-following, regurgitation, and predictability' (McGraw & Mason, 2021, p. 8) in order to reproduce 'some of the most unimaginative, mind-numbing examples of writing' (p. 8). Research also suggests that the pressure to perform encourages students to eschew risks (Bacalja, 2021; Frawley & McLean Davies, 2015).

Further, regimes of standardisation, as seen within some elements of VCE English, refashion students less as people and more as 'units for analysis' (Yandell et al., 2020, p. 4). This genericising and standardising work of the curriculum shapes young people into competitive units with middle-class ways of being (Nieto, 1999). Deep concerns are also raised about how these standardising practices are enacted in some of Australia's rural or poorer areas and schools where a culture of uncertainty and adaptation, not individuality or distinction, is manifest (Anonymous, 2018; Dove, 2022; Radford, 2015). Research finds that examination pressures tend to position students as 'subalterns' – abstract empty vessels negotiating a cultural realm wholly separate from their lives, without any 'aspect of their identity … dimension of their subjectivities, experiences, histories [or] affiliations' (Yandell et al., 2020, p. 11).

I outline these challenges associated with VCE English because they speak to the ways rural students can experience the subject and be positioned by official curriculum and assessment systems as responsible for their own success (see Rose, 1996). It is also important to acknowledge that these challenges arise not only in VCE English but are part of a wider concern in contemporary education policy and practice. The 'long shadow of neoliberalism' (McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2019, p. 2) has impacted the subject and furthers the inequality of student outcomes, the discourse demands of senior schooling, the value of dominant knowledges, and the ways students are homogenised by highly competitive, standardised assessments.

Bootstrapping Aussie battlers: Talking with hard-working VCE English students

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, students often invoked an 'Aussie battler' discourse to describe themselves and others in their school community. This was present through oft-repeated terms such as 'work' and 'effort' and phrases such as 'being productive' – all of which drew on the idea of students as workers, as labourers. The following section features four students, Temperance, Annah, Billy and Frank, and considers the ways these rural students voiced their roles as 'Aussie battlers' in subject English. Temperance identifies as a '*very white*' '*dumb-dumb-brain*' '*bogan*'. Her mum works in aged care and her father was a diesel mechanic but earns more money now as a garbage collector. They have a small farm with sheep for the home freezer. Temperance claims to '*hate school*'. English '*sucks*' and '*is not fair*'. Annah feels that '*no matter what you do in life … you need to have … basic English skills*' and has little time for students who complain or make excuses for their lack of achievement in the subject. Last year she read 150 books after setting a goal for herself and is only interested in doing classwork if it will help her in the end-of-year exam. Billy identifies as '*passionate*' and '*energetic*'. His mum completed tertiary education and now works selling software. His dad works on the farm. He is fiercely loyal to his '*tight-as group*' who '*all play footy together*'. You want Billy in your class because he might be the only one who can lead his mates towards courteous classroom behaviour every once in a while. Frank wants to stay on at school so he can join the army. He thinks of himself as '*probably trustworthy … Maybe … something? Hmmm … maybe kind? That's about it … maybe humble. It's pretty funny saying it, coz … um … most people don't see that*'. His mum trained as a nurse and his dad was a miner, but now they run a dairy farm.

The 'Aussie battler' narratives these students used during interviews signify three main ideas about their experiences in subject English: first, the idea that hard work will bring rewards; second, that rote learning is vital in order to improve results; and third, that tasks in English classes should not be questioned, but completed 'check-box style' to comply with school and VCAA expectations.

'I can improve at anything, if I work at it'

> *If you fall behind you're screwed! You have to constantly work hard! … I feel like there's nothing wrong to, like, always be striving for better. There's nothing wrong with that, like, I'm a determined student. I can make stuff happen.*

Temperance's feelings regarding the constant and persistent work requirements of senior subject English are made clear in her statement above. Similar views were voiced by many other students and a belief in '*effort*', '*training*' and sheer hard '*work*' was a common thread in interviews, where all students felt that they would improve their English achievement and marks if they forced themselves to '*knuckle down*'. For some it was simply a matter of '*I gotta do something*' so then '*it'll just happen*'. Students acknowledged that many of their peers '*don't have a high success rate*', but this was explained as being dependent on '*how much effort you're going to put in*'. If students were given lower-than-expected marks, they should simply '*see what [they] did wrong and fix it up*'. The idea that a student '*can improve*

at anything if [they] work at it' resounded throughout the narratives.

These students focused on individual effort in their relationship to their work in subject English, reflecting a belief in individual responsibility for results. They were confident that *'practice makes better'* and that, accordingly, peers who achieve high marks must *'practise a bit'* or be *'wanting to improve'* so they can *'keep on being productive'*, and to some extent this is true. Billy was sure about this and felt that nobody has *'really got a competitive advantage, like, no one's born better than someone else'*. He, like the other students, was adamant that achieving in subject English is all about *'motivation'* and *'effort'*. However, Billy's beliefs about hard work and equal opportunities for all students, while admirable, fail to recognise the social and economic complexities that are evident in 'the game' of school (Teese, 2007, p. 45).

Drawing on these comments, there seems to be an understanding among the students that if any student fails to do well it is because they do not work hard enough. In his critique of Australia's national curriculum, Roberts (2014) suggests Australian education policy is driven by the neoliberal version of equality, in which if all students are taught the same content and are regulated by the same testing procedures and standards, then the system has achieved its goal of equity (Lingard, 2010). Concerns about inequality of opportunity, access and participation are reinterpreted through individualist discourses of individual merit, hard work and persistence, without concern for the uneven playing field (Berliner, 2013; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). Such discourses work on two levels. On the one hand, they disguise structural inequities by removing any notion of individual needs or challenges through the standardisation of curriculum, teaching and testing measures (Cairns, 2013). On the other, they place blame for any deficits or failures firmly on the student. This is also where Cormack and Comber's (2013) concerns about 'if only' rationales such as 'if only the parents read them a bedtime story' and 'if only the children worked harder' (p. 80) arise. Such rationales ignore entrenched inequities and the complexities of educational needs (Crumb et al., 2022). The belief that educational success is dependent only on hard work and a positive attitude is understandable in a country where the nostalgic 'Aussie battler' myth is embedded within neoliberal discourse, contributing to the rural 'real-and-imaginary' (Green & Corbett, 2013, p. 19). Neoliberal discourse places responsibility for success or failure firmly upon the individual, and thus a social crisis appears not as a wider policy concern, but as an individual disaster directly related to the acts of the person affected (Beck, 1992). Together, myth and ideology perpetuate an illusion that a student's social, cultural and geographic position – the complexity and nuance of their rural spaces – matters little to their capacity to achieve (Coladarci, 2007; Teese, 2007).

Billy, Temperance and Frank, buoyed by the myth of the 'Aussie battler', felt able to make an active choice as the 'author of their own life's biography, to construct their lives as a project, as an enterprise' (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009, p. 51). Education has given them the power to *'make the most of their own existence'* (Rose, 1996, p. 46), and they believe that their hard work will be recognised and rewarded by the education system. These findings add rural student voices to what some claim is an overwhelming societal belief in personal responsibility, the 'dominant common-sense rationality that if … people try harder/work harder they should prosper' (Cormack & Comber, 2013, p. 80). Society, having adopted neoliberal, survival-of-the-fittest principles to which there seems no alternative, believes in the inevitability of this struggle (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). Students who are able to pull themselves up by 'grit, bootstraps, or a positive attitude remedy' (Crumb et al., 2022, p. 4) are the extraordinary cases. Rural students, should they fail, believe it's 'probably their own fault' (Aitkin, 2005, p. 11) and 'are chided for not having chosen better' (Corbett, 2016, p. 149). Those few who do succeed in the neoliberal system are likely to be from the dominant middle classes (Brann-Barrett, 2011). For Temperance, Annah, Billy and Frank, however, dissatisfaction arises when their efforts in English receive little reward.

Going over, going over and going over: Rote learning and memorisation to increase marks

When asked for examples of the work they had undertaken to improve their marks, most students I interviewed felt that revision of English skills and steadfastly following essay scaffolds was the answer. They believed that practising *'sophisticated language'* through repetition and using *'big words'* such as *'evokes'* were strategies that would help their marks. Annah noted that *'you just have to sit down and you just have to go over'* words and quotes from texts in order to memorise them. This achievement through rote learning was viewed as an *'obvious'* way to increase marks. Temperance was particularly forthright when musing on the link between memorisation and performance:

> *Obviously, like, right? Like, unless you're an idiot. Obviously, there is obviously evidence, but obviously, but I think, it is quite natural, in the sense that you … you can obviously get better at it … I definitely think, obviously there is some truth in that. There's no denying it.*

Indeed, there is no denying that some forms of practice will improve performance; however, it is concerning that these rural students felt that memorisation of words and quotes would give them access to marks in the '*very high*' area of the rubric (80–100%). Considering Temperance's current achievements in English were hard won through constant effort, she maintains her belief in rote learning as one avenue to improved achievement. Her insistence on the link between repetition and achievement suggests that she, along with other students, may model herself on the Victorian-era student ideal – 'blank slates to be etched, mugs to be filled, sponges to absorb, or computers to program' (Mills, 2008, p. 215) in order to succeed in assessment tasks. Her constant reference to 'obviously' within this spurt also suggests that Temperance had considered this complex issue in some depth and is making meaning as she contemplates the value of various forms of revision. Her narrative here also suggests it would be entirely unnatural if any student using rote learning failed to adopt 'sophisticated and precise language', employ a 'rich use of vocabulary', and use language 'fluently and confidently' (VCAA, 2023) in assessment tasks, and thus achieve 'very high' marks.

There is bountiful research regarding English and the impact of formulaic requirements for assessment (Doecke et al., 2014; Wallis, 2014). Research suggests that in response to these requirements, students tend to practise writing essays and eschew creative and intellectual risks in their writing work (Bacalja, 2021). The skill-and-drill approach to learning is commonly used in lower-achieving schools where there is pressure to teach to the test and improve functional literacy and low-level comprehension rather than developing skills for deeper conceptual understanding (Gannon, 2019; McKnight, 2020). This supports the idea that students who view themselves as Aussie battlers are compliant and 'content to settle for less' (Aitkin, 2005, p. 11). They are not afraid of hard yakka but are cautious about any risks that may affect their future educational success.

English? You 'just do it'

> *I'd rather not, coz I'm not into writing stuff. But I just do it anyway.*

Frank's idea that '*you just have to keep doing it*' in order to achieve better marks was familiar across all students, although it was significant that some students like Temperance recognised that no matter what they did, they didn't seem to be able to improve into or beyond the 'very high' 80% mark. They bemoaned the demands of constant revision and the incessant '*struggling*' without feeling they had ever mastered a task. This was also noted by Billy:

> *There's no real endpoint and there's more just straight into, like, once you finish this, you're straight up into the next one.*

This monotony was simply accepted by Frank too, who felt that students should '*just do it*' whether they are '*into*' English or not, implying a lack of agency and unqualified resignation. Frank, in particular, is stoic about completing VCE English in order to gain '*the piece of paper that says you did it*'. He felt he was not actually accomplishing anything particularly meaningful and his overriding feeling when only '*just*' passing an assessment task was one of '*relief*'. Frank's feelings echo the thoughts of some other students who dutifully complete a '*pointless*' task simply '*coz it was set*'.

This analysis of rural student experience supports the theory that English simply tests student aptitude for compliance (McKnight, 2020; Parr & Doecke, 2012). The regularity of student discourse inferring lack of agency confirms Anson's (2020) concerns about English students being viewed merely as 'docile bodies to be disciplined or transformed' (p. 11). These rural students aligned with the overriding 'culture of adaptation' (Teese et al., 2009, p. 89) demanded by standardised assessments, where students attempt to modify their ways of being in order to compete in the subject. This modification, according to Bacalja (2021), is borne of a curriculum modelled on the dominant discourse of middle-class academic values. As such, it affords little room for these rural students' individuality or opinion. Students must ensure that their analysis is both Anglo-centric and middle-class, and play 'the game' (Teese, 2007, p. 45), denying 'the messiness' (McKnight, 2020 p. 577) of individuality and acquiescing to academic discourse requirements (Patterson, 2008). For these rural students, English is a site of social reproduction; they are taught to follow directions without question and adhere to the 'blueprint for social engineering' (Illesca, 2014, p. 157) which produces English students of a particular kind (Gee, 2006). This in turn drives a culture of adaptation as students bend their ways of 'saying-writing-designing-

doing-being-believing-valuing' (Gee, 1996, p. 127) towards those dictated by the VCAA (Roberts, 2015). In this way dominant discourse has become hard policy and maintains inequality by further marginalising other discourse varieties (Cushing, 2023).

As outlined earlier, the student is positioned by the education system and neoliberal discourse as one who is learning to be a citizen (Petersson et al., 2007) and at the same time as 'learning to show up regularly and on time and prepared to endure boredom' (Mayher, 1990, p. 269), offering themselves as future workforce fodder (Corbett, 2016). The 'Aussie battler' students are thus groomed 'to be good little automatons – standardized, uniform cogs in the reproduction of the status quo' (Brannon et al., 2008, p. 18) and continue to 'sustain the invisibility of systems of privilege and inequality' (Whitman, 2013 p. 51). This has had a tremendous impact on the way the Australian education system works as an 'oppressively successful' (Patterson, 1995, p. 107) sieve to sort, label and grade children for employers (Connell, 1993; Reid, 2013).

Concluding remarks

This paper has highlighted the voices of my own rural students and examined the positioning that occurs when rural space is abstracted by metropolitan discourses, practices and standards. The students' words suggest that they view themselves as 'Aussie battlers', and I suggest that this discourse is a way for them to use their agency – to both push back against and negotiate the challenges they encounter in VCE English and schooling more generally. In education, the 'Aussie battler' and other such evocations have been achieved via neoliberal nurturing of bootstrap myths that work to perpetuate institutionally maintained power. Such myths, when examined alongside standardised curriculum and high-stakes testing, reveal the spatial 'gatekeeping function' (Ivanic, 1998, p. 57) of English, foster distinct rural identities, and bear out a range of very real sociocultural impacts on these VCE English students.

In Australia, Connell's (1993) work on curricular justice suggests that a way to overcome the bias of conventional thought would be to think from the standpoint of the education system's least advantaged players. If, as Bacalja (2021) claims, the curriculum is designed in line with the values and characteristics of Australia's most successful citizens, then choosing a standpoint with origins in the values of the overlooked and marginalised would facilitate a more democratic education system. Rural education is still, it seems, 'something of a blindspot' (Green, 2013, p. 26). This research is one of only few qualitative projects foregrounding rural student voices on senior English in Australia, and considerably more work is needed to determine the impact of the subject on rural students nationally (see Dove, 2022). A great deal more research highlighting rural student voice is crucial to promote a more equitable future for all Australians and to advocate for rural students who are so often brushed aside by national quantitative studies focusing on achievement outcomes, and whose rural voices are most often lost in the neoliberal education policy landscape. Harold Rosen once spoke of 'the uncomfortable things' (Hardcastle & Medway, 2009, p. 12) he had to accept as a teacher. It may be a challenging, deeply uncomfortable truth for the dominant majority in Victoria to accept that the institution of VCE subject English is metrocentric and unjust, but surely our rural students deserve more than is currently acknowledged.

Notes

1 All students have chosen pseudonyms.

2 The fieldwork this research is based on was conducted on Gunaikurnai country in the Gippsland region, a large rural area in south-eastern Victoria that stretches across 41,500 square kilometres and is known primarily for dairy farming and mining (ABS, 2022). Focus group discussions were conducted with 15 students, with a further four students selected for individual interviews.

3 NAPLAN is the national, annual literacy and numeracy assessment for Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

4 To qualify for the VCE, students must complete two years (four units) of either English, English Language, Literature or English as an Additional Language.

5 The ATAR is a score used by students to access higher education and further pathways.

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Rural Reimagining:
Middle Leadership for English Teachers

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Abstract: Drawing on previous research into how women establish themselves as leaders in rural schools, this paper develops a model for conceptualising the role of Head Teachers of English in rural schools. Increasingly, the professional identity of teachers and leaders involves negotiating multiple subjectivities. This is influenced by the inequity, marginalisation and intersectionality that characterise professional practice in rural schools. This article seeks to provide new ways of thinking about developing and promoting English teacher leadership in the context of rural schools, with specific reference to both experienced and early career teachers. The current promotion of the *Professional standards for middle leaders* (AITSL, 2024) offers an opportunity for educators to situate future discussions around leadership in a more generative dialogue about teaching English in rural schools.

Keywords: leadership, middle leadership, professional teacher identity, rural, English teaching, race, intersectionality

Introduction

Head Teachers of English in rural schools experience unique challenges and opportunities living and working in rural communities. While leadership in rural schools is complex (Hardwick-Franco, 2019), there is a paucity of research about how rural teachers become leaders (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Niesche & Heffernan, 2020). In addition, renewed interest in middle leadership (Elliott et al., 2022; Grootenboer, 2020) has drawn attention to gaps in current teacher professional development that fail to include differentiated rural experiences. This needs to be addressed. My research, which examined the existing systemic barriers to women becoming leaders in rural schools, informs the reconceptualisation of a model for middle leadership for English teachers in rural communities.

My research, situated in south-west Victoria, examined how women negotiate multiple subjectivities to establish themselves as leaders in rural schools. Designed as a qualitative study, the research employed Feminist Post-structural Discourse Analysis, arts-based methodologies and marginalia to create vignettes based on an analysis of data from semi-structured interviews, point-in-time provocations through email exchanges, and a reflective research journal. The fictional vignettes exemplify a playful and experimental approach to reading and analysing data (Rizvi, 2019), and preserve teacher anonymity in small close-knit rural communities. Rural leaders are depicted as performing roles while navigating the tension between the professional and personal. While many rural communities in the state of Victoria are ethnically diverse, however, the site for this research was not. As a woman and a mixed-race teacher and leader, I sought to problematise intersectional issues such as race, gender and class – issues that were not confirmed by the whiteness of the participants in this study. However, we did collectively share the discursive repertoires that emerged from the vignettes about women in leadership in rural schools: 'Middle of Nowhere', 'Better than the Boys' and 'Off Balance'. In seeking to understand how women assume leadership, the research identifies the dominant discourses that impact rural school leaders at both senior and middle levels.

This paper focuses on middle-level leadership, and seeks to develop and promote the

leadership disposition of Heads of English in rural schools. First, it presents an overview of the 'rural' in the literature, and argues that discussion around middle leadership positions like Head of English must consider contextual contributors to identity formation. Next, it cautions against a narrow, homogenous understanding of leadership, and calls attention to how gender and race intersect such roles. I also draw on my professional history and praxis as a leader in a rural school. Finally, it presents a new model for conceptualising the leadership of the Head of English role.

Defining the rural

Scholarship focused on the rural is bound by complex and competing definitions. The rural is often considered to be a cultural backwater, with negative and deficit overtones (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018). Pini et al. (2014) argue that this is why scholarship has shied away from the rural as a relevant site for research; the urban is ultimately considered more 'relevant' to policy-makers and politicians. The term 'rural and remote' is used by the Australian Standard Geographical Classification System (ABS, 2022) to identify places and spaces of significant distance from an urban centre. While the notion of the rural is highly contested, a simple working definition around geographical distances from a city centre is employed here as one way of knowing and experiencing the rural.

Alternative theories of the rural that consider a 'pedagogy of place' (Gruenewald, 2003; Somerville, 2007; Perumal, 2015; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2015) challenge these ideas, and reflect Thomson's (2000) framing of the discourse of the rural as the 'thisness' of a school context and the multi-layered, intricacies of its 'political, cultural social and economic relations' (p. 2). Corbett (2016) argues there must be a level of 'contextual sensitivity and place connections in the examination of educational questions' (p. 275), highlighting that context matters when it comes to discussion around schools (Bradbeer, 2018; Bush, 2018). Therefore, definitions of the rural extend beyond geographical space and place, and assume both literal and metaphorical complexities. This paper recognises that a significant shift has taken place in the way ideas of rurality are understood, and, in '[u]nderstanding what the place brings to teachers [and leaders] – rather than what teachers bring to the place' (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018, p. 302), how these ideas impact middle leaders. Head Teachers of English in rural and regional schools lead in the 'middle of nowhere', and this is fraught with the deficit positions of rural space and place that are different from, and 'other' to, their urban counterparts.

Middle leadership in the rural

Understanding the nuances of rural space is fundamental to addressing the leadership needs of our rural schools (Drummond & Halsey, 2013; Eacott et al., 2021). Without acknowledgement of context and its impact on a leadership disposition, efforts to promote and expand opportunities for rural middle leadership are ineffective. Identity is a complex, contested and fluid notion (Day et al., 2006); the professional identity of the school leader undergoes many revisions, and some of these iterations are particular to the rural. Niesche and Heffernan (2020) argue that what leaders value and believe inform both their personal identities and their professional practice. Teaching standards have provided a much-needed framework for the teaching profession that acts as a tool for professional development, accountability and learning. However, the standards promoted by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) for teachers from graduate to leading level do not acknowledge the importance of differentiated contexts in shaping and defining professional growth.

AITSL's introduction of *Professional standards for middle leaders* in 2024 aimed to promote and develop leadership across educational sectors and all states and territories in Australia. The implementation of these standards recognises that middle leadership is a vital part of not only the collective school leadership structure, but also connecting key stakeholders more broadly.

Establishing these standards provides clarity on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to thrive and work effectively as a middle leader and facilitate improvement in student progress and achievement. The new standards will help current middle leaders to reflect on their ways of working, provide a vision for their career development, and support educational organisations in attracting, developing and retaining quality teachers with leadership aspirations and potential (AITSL, 2023, p. 7).

The *Middle leadership literature review and document analysis (*AITSL, 2023) suggests that while there is no common definition of middle leadership (p. 8), there is clear evidence of the role being diverse. Different contexts are key contributors to each unique middle

leader's disposition, and impact their professional and personal lives (Day et al., 2006). Mockler (2011) similarly argues for the overlapping influence of personal, professional and political contexts on teacher identity. However, alignment between leadership and context has often been ignored in research (Hallinger, 2018) – specifically, here, the ways in which the rural context shapes middle leaders (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). There is still a gap in the literature on how different contexts like the 'rural' influence the professional identities and practice of teachers and leaders in roles such as Heads of English (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Starr & White, 2008; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018).

In the last decade, there has been burgeoning research on the connection between leadership and student outcomes (Hattie, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2020), and on the complexity of recruitment in rural schools (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). However, to support teachers in leadership positions in rural schools, a more expansive view of leadership in rural communities is required. Scholarship that positions leadership as crucial for improving the delivery, engagement and support of learning (Eacott et al., 2021) frames a new model for thinking about how Head Teachers of English in rural schools might address the needs of both experienced and early career teachers. Specifically, it suggests how teacher leaders in rural communities might develop broad leadership dispositions that equip them to address the challenges of rural schools.

Broadening the view of leadership in rural schools

My research on how women become leaders in rural schools utilised an arts-based methodology and method to understand the lived reality of the leadership experience. The role of a leader, particularly in a rural community, is defined by context and informed by intersectional issues of gender, race and class. Negotiating multiple identities as a leader, whether at school or subject department level, in a small rural school and community is complex.

The following three vignettes form part of the analysis of my research data and highlight three key issues experienced by both senior and middle leaders in rural schools: the felt lack of leadership support; the tension between the personal and the professional self; and the idea of being 'numb' and languishing in an isolated community. The vignettes exemplify the discursive frameworks of 'Middle of Nowhere', 'Better than the Boys' and 'Off Balance'. Hannah' is a vignette constructed from my data on female rural school principals, while 'Anna' and 'Eva' are based on middle-level leaders.

Hannah

Hannah reached for the cup of coffee and paused, holding the warm cup in her hands just for a moment. She had hoped the heat would trigger a wake-up and the fog in her head would lift. Caffeine was literally what was keeping her going now. She had not slept well for weeks, her work schedule was heavy, and her desk held a mass of papers, post-it notes and unfinished to-do lists. She had not responded to messages from her friends in what felt like forever.

Twelve months ago, this job had had all the appeal in the world – a tree change of sorts. A new position, a new place and a new adventure. But the honeymoon was over, and Hannah felt completely overwhelmed by the daily pressures of leading this little school and keeping it afloat. She had worked in large city schools with the support of colleagues, and teams of people to collaborate with and defer to. Now she was operating without a base level of support. She spent more time talking to Glenda, the office administrator, than the half-a-dozen teachers she had on staff.

Hannah had found regional meetings with other principals unhelpful. The network was cliquey. She wasn't surprised that she was only one of three women in the role of school principal in her region, but she was disappointed that there had been such a poor welcome and orientation to the role and the local community. The meetings were dominated by several strong male voices whose patterns of speech suggested that they had talked like this together for a very long time. Mr A. would defer to Mr B. who would in turn defer to Mr C., and back again. She would go to these meetings hoping to take away a snippet of information that might rescue or redirect her own school leadership experience. But she was not seen or heard by any of them. They made their noise, their voices creating their symphony that continued to drown her out.

Anna

Anna had enjoyed talking with the recent group of pre-service student teachers. Four students had come from Monash University in the city for their final teaching placement. Oh, how enthusiastic they were. Each new class, new school student and new learning opportunity they appeared to drink in. In her role as

Dean of Staff, Anna was confident that the pre-service teachers would flourish. But she was less enthusiastic about her teaching nowadays. As she responded to their polite conversation, she had realised that she disliked the banter over instant coffee and Arnott's shortbread creams.

Today, as she graded papers and ushered school students into working groups, her mind drifted to thoughts of her mother Jane, who had recently had a fall and broken her pelvis. This would be the end. No more independent living, no more medication or surgery. The wider family had decided to let nature take its course. Anna would bear the brunt of caring for and nursing her for now. A nagging feeling of guilt and resentment plagued her as she instructed her students and moved around the classroom. If she continued working, she feared her mother would be discouraged by her lack of attentiveness. But when she took leave to care for her she was consumed by guilt, as she knew her students would get further and further behind in their coursework.

This tension between her teaching and personal lives was consuming her. It was not that she did not care about her students any more; she was just so tired of having to do it all. Emotionally exhausted. The administration and the mountain of papers on her desk were too much to face. Ironically, all those student wellbeing surveys would have to wait – wait one more week. She was reminded by the student teachers of how ambitious and certain you can be when youth is on your side. You are unscathed by life's battlegrounds and you know very few canyons of darkness and despair, so you hope for a bright future.

Eva

She wiped the lemon juice from the chopping board. The house was abuzz with people – young people. Her daughter was hosting a dinner party and had invited her nearest and dearest. Eva was preparing the meal methodically. Her body ached from the stresses and demands of the week. Late-night preparation, answering phone calls about students and organising her household. Her husband had been away all week and Eva was less than enthusiastic about throwing a party. She wanted him to return.

It should not have surprised her when the blade sliced into her finger, but Eva's mind was elsewhere as she cut the last lemon for the guacamole. The wooden board glistened with fresh, bright blood. It marbled its way into the juice and pulp and discarded lemon halves. For a moment she froze. It didn't hurt – yet. She ran her finger under the cold tap and looked around the room. No one had noticed her drama, her pain. She sighed, knowing that this was an all-too-familiar experience.

Only that morning she had read Tim Winton's *More*, and the main character, Jerra, had sliced his finger. His partner was not 'worried' about the injury. There was a strange coincidence to this evening's events, and Eva knew it. Would she, like Jerra, bandage her finger and ignore it? Would she make the mistake of allowing everyone's needs to trump her own? Eva was selfless. She dragged herself through each day in much the same way as she had emerged from childhood into being an adult.

> Each day was like swimming through a pool of treacle.
> Foggy head.
> Blurry vision.
> Overcome by fatigue.

This was her new modus operandi; it was what she knew to be her life. But after 15 years in schools, teaching and leading had pushed her to the edge. Eva had an overwhelming sensation of being on the cusp of change. She had worked so hard to be a leading teacher, pushing aside her insecurities and doubts. She had advocated hard for change in her classroom and department. But all these successes had sucked the joy right out of her being. Eva was numb.

Hannah, Anna, and Eva each grapple with the discursive challenges of being a woman in leadership in a small rural community, working with new graduates and the established hierarchies in their respective educational systems. Hannah's feelings of isolation and working without professional support are more pronounced in a small rural school. Anna's feelings of hopelessness as she manages the competing demands of the professional and personal are evident in her experience of having to 'do it all'. Eva's life is anchored to the lives of her partner and children, who thrive in the rural area, and yet she feels stuck and unable to change her role. While some of these challenges to middle leadership are not unique to the rural, working and living in the 'middle of nowhere' intensify the issues related to gender and finding balance.

Leading in the 'Middle of Nowhere'

Drawing on Feminist Post-structural Discourse Analysis (Baxter, 2003), an interpretative framework emerged from my data: the notion of being in the 'middle of

nowhere'. For many of the participants in my research, the rural communities in which they lived and worked were separate from other populated or urban areas. The geographical and physical disconnect they experienced was underscored by more complex emotional and social responses to being 'in the middle' and feeling unanchored by issues of inequity, marginalisation and isolation. In the Hannah vignette, this meant recognising that the move to a rural school was a 'tree change' to a place where she was 'not seen or heard'. It can take time to be accepted and belong to a rural community. As a middle-level leader, though, Anna, in her vignette, was overwhelmed by the enormity of the demands of her role, while Eva's story captures the vexation described as 'swimming through a pool of treacle'.

Participants' responses to place-based questions about their community such as 'What does this place smell like, sound like, look like, feel like when I move through it?' (Somerville, 2007, p. 153) explored the experiences of being an insider/outsider, alien and other, when leading in rural schools. The middle leaders in the study reflect these sentiments as individuals beyond the more generalised vignettes.

Annabelle, a leader who held two Head Teacher roles, experienced isolation. She said, '*Hmmm. I mean anybody in a rural school like this, you are isolated. It is that simple*'. Harriet, a newly appointed Head of Faculty, said:

> *I think we are quite geographically isolated here … It is very hard to get resources to come to this town, it is a long way for people to travel and I think that creates that closed mindset because you can't see outside of this little town because it is very difficult, there are obstacles.*

Participants used words like '*isolated*', '*closed mindset*', '*difficult*' and '*obstacles*' to describe being a middle leader in their rural schools, reflecting my own experience as a Head of English in two rural schools. As a rural leader, I experienced a disconnection from my teacher association and professional networks, and I was intrigued to find that broadly, colleagues seemed less ambitious for leadership opportunities. Annabelle's lack of confidence in her leadership role is summed up in the following comment:

> *It was interesting when you got in touch with me, with [my] role as a leader, I don't see myself like that at all. I said, 'Whoa, maybe I am', but I hadn't considered it.*

Similarly, Harriet performed a leadership role but did not see her worth in her work:

> *I am not feeling like I am very significant at [my school], I am feeling like I am just in the role, I am just a piece of paper, whereas elsewhere I have felt that I am a leader.*

For these rural leaders, developing relationships with self and understanding their professional identity formation was pivotal. According to Blackmore (2017):

> Leadership is a set of social practices and processes that we recognise. Leadership is relational: It is about processes, shared understandings, and communicative practices; reflecting on, in and for practice as a professional community and instilling and drawing on the values of recognition, respect, and trust important to professional communities (p. 212).

The identity formation of teachers and leaders involves negotiating multiple subjectivities that are influenced by a range of professional contexts. Mockler (2011) argues that professional learning is identity work. The way we learn to lead is culturally constructed, and shapes our sense of self (Wilkinson & Bristol, 2017). To date, the preparation and support for middle leaders has been ad hoc at best. AITSL's (2024) new standards for middle leadership spotlight this issue and forecast significant positive change in professional learning and leadership in the Australian educational context.

Middle leadership in rural schools requires teachers to answer up to senior leaders and lead down to their faculty, while also meeting the daily demands of students and parents. The roles are blended and nonlinear. A senior leader might be working as a Head of Faculty, or an early career teacher might have taken on the role of Head of English and be supporting pre-service teachers. White et al. (2009) argue that 'rural schools and their communities have to be active in shaping their futures' (p. 13) to avoid an oversimplification of the role of leader. Being a leader in rural schools requires adopting a disposition of accepting discomfort and disorientation, as there are problems accessing services and receiving timely leadership development and support, and in some instances, a lack of collegial connection.

As Carla, a senior leader participant in my research study, said: '*I am changing all the time to meet different needs. The way I lead here would be vastly different from leading a large Melbourne school*'. Carla recalls the established support network that guided her early leadership experiences in the city and the professional relationships that gave her permission to develop her leadership skills and knowledge. My research findings revealed a scarcity of leadership programs for rural schools, which resulted in a narrowing of career

pathways for the women in my study. Dana described her tenure as a leader in a rural school:

> *But there are only x places, and I didn't want to have to drive every day. It was the best job I didn't get. Whereas if you are in town, in Melbourne, how many schools are within a radius? And if this one is not suiting your needs there is probably one just down the road that is more likely to.*

Reflections on being 'Off Balance'

In the data, leaders in rural schools across all sectors were frustrated by the systems in which they worked. Being a teacher and leader in a rural community often meant that there were no boundaries between their professional and personal lives, and they felt off balance. While some rural leaders revealed that they often felt invisible in their roles, others felt trapped by being recognised in the community, feeling like they were still in their roles even in the supermarket. Ivy, a leader from my study, said, '*You feel like you are never taking your hat off*' and you '*can't be anonymous*'. She could not be '*off duty*' or escape the gaze of the community. Rural middle leaders felt simultaneously invisible and trapped by the scrutiny afforded by the fishbowl effect of operating in a small community. Contested subjectivities emerged from these discursive challenges and reflect my own praxis as a leader in a rural school.

In addition, rural schools can be a career 'stepping stone' – a space to transition from teacher to leader to a more highly regarded position in an urban environment. Consequently, there can be rapid turnover of leadership, and a lack of continuity and strategic thinking in roles like the Head of English. The participants in my study were driven by the desire to make a difference to the students they worked with, and they articulated that relationships were vital to the way they led (Eacott, 2017). Annabelle grappled with her identity as a leader, saying, '*Teaching is not a walk-in, walk-out job, you carry it with you … I don't think kids see that. I perform in the classroom. I reckon I am different in the classroom*'.

Early career teachers who are enticed to fill leadership gaps in rural schools in order to alleviate pipeline issues are often overwhelmed. They must manage complex school relationships while simultaneously mastering the basic craft of teaching. Some rejected the invitation to lead and juggle teaching, travelling long distances, meeting family commitments and managing second businesses in the agricultural industry, as Carla, one of the research participants, said:

> *I have been trying desperately to get one of my teachers to step up to leadership now … She has a farm as well, so it is vastly different here compared to Melbourne. Here they have other commitments as well, they often have a farm, and three of my teachers all come from farms, so they have that dual role and often don't want leadership … they want to be able to go home.*

School is one part of a working life, and for Carla's staff, stepping into leadership compromised the 'balance'.

Being 'Better than the Boys'

In other cases, established teachers looking for leadership positions can be forced to wait until an opportunity arises, as some leaders stay in their roles for significant portions of their careers. In my own rural school experience, the Head of English role had been highly coveted and presided over by a male staff member of long standing, so I felt pressure to seize the opportunity when it arose, despite lingering doubts about how a mixed-race woman could lead an English Department in a conservative, largely monocultural rural community. There was a need to strive to be 'better than the boys'. This discourse of difference sparked all sorts of professional and personal discomfort and explains the 'wayfinding' language reflected in the final vignette I included in my research – a story from my own experience. For context, I am an attendee at an important school function:

> *My name-tag permitted me to network at this event, to engage with attendees, but without my leadership role and position in the school, I knew that I would be dismissed by this community. Becoming a leader has been a process of me wayfinding in the in-between of a rural school. It has demanded that I navigate the behaviours of men who silenced women and schemed to advance the blokes into leadership. And it has largely been about me finding my purpose, confidence, and knowledge of self to support my leadership experience.*

I confess that the various subject positions ('ways of being') that are available to me as a leader in a rural school have not always served to help me understand how racism – the violent, insidious, and ongoing racism present in a rural setting – plays out. As difficult as verbal abuse might be, language is just one vehicle for discrimination and othering. Sticks and stones and all of that: words become insignificant when subtle behaviours work to undermine, marginalise and discredit.

The micro-aggressions I spoke of in the quote above inform a range of intersectional issues – race, gender, class and ableism – and these can radically shift the

professional identities of middle leaders and create additional discomfort. The context in which teachers become leaders and take on the Head of English role thus matters (Bradbeer, 2018).

A significant aspect of my research is the way I am positioned as a researcher, leader and teacher in the data. Three issues define my own experience as a Head of English in a rural community. First, as I am a mixed-race woman, there are parts of my leadership narrative that focus on feeling invisible and discriminated against by the 'powers that be'. This phrase embodies both misogynist behaviour and a fear of difference that is echoed in the data. Issues of inequity and marginalisation appear as the result of conservative outdated attitudes to gender and race. Second, I experienced professional isolation due to inadequate networks and support, and limited resources curtailed my professional development. More recently, technology has enhanced opportunities for building a professional community; however, a digital connection is no substitute for an in-person relationship. Finally, English teachers who champion reading and writing are often challenged by rural community attitudes that do not value education. A broader challenge for Heads of English is thus to engage students in reading and encourage parents to develop their children's fundamental literacy skills for lifelong learning. I reflect on parent-teacher interviews I have conducted as a Head of English and note that it is hard to instil the love of reading in students when parents claim that they did not read any books while at school, and they 'turned out okay'.

Sinclair (2012) argues that 'women's leadership often involves working within, around and underneath institutional, cultural and societal contexts that may be authoritarian, oppressive and hierarchical, gendered and racist' (p. 25). As noted above, participants in my research did not articulate the same intersectional challenges that I experienced, but their experiences collectively were characterised by a lack of current professional development offerings, and validated the need to address the lack of support for leadership in rural schools, recognising that they needed to lead in subversive ways to counter systemic challenges.

A new model for English Heads of Department in rural schools

Being a Head of English in rural areas is spatially, specifically, realised. Acknowledging the importance of context and the middle leader disposition, I propose there are four ways to frame a new model of middle leadership in rural schools: disruptive leadership; radical research; temporal reflection; and new voices.

Firstly, real and lasting change in the leadership space requires a disruption of common understandings of leadership, for there is no singular model of leadership – no one-size-fits-all model – that will work in rural schools (Bush, 2018). Leadership in these rural learning spaces must be visible, and enhanced by nuanced conversations around the context and culture of the rural and the local. Innovative leadership might look different in some places: for example, like teachers leading collaboratively in job-share positions; like early career and established teachers leading together as novices and experts; or like leaders being mentored by colleagues both in and outside of school. Disruptive leadership in rural schools requires agility in order to form partnerships across sectors and systems that will build leadership expertise to meet student outcomes.

Secondly, radical research about rural leadership requires new methods to both expand knowledge and protect the anonymity of participants and the integrity of relationships in a rural community. Such methods must allow participants to speak in confidence about leadership dispositions and the disconnections and disorientation of intersectional issues that define their experiences. The vignettes produced in my research highlight how creative methods can provide powerful avenues for gathering and presenting data. Further tertiary-funded opportunities for teacher-led research are paramount.

Thirdly, teachers and leaders need time to reflect on their professional practice. Current working conditions in schools do not afford middle leaders time to systematically review their practice. The *Professional standards for middle leaders* (AITSL, 2024) are a catalyst for new thinking about reflective practice for English learning-area leaders. This model must be revised and renewed in an ongoing process, informed by current research and supported broadly by the reports, training and development offered by AITSL – specifically by teacher associations like the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Association for the Teaching of English. It should be modelled by practitioners at conferences, in online webinars and in in-house department meetings. Schools have a unique opportunity to lead the change by creating time for reflective practice, coaching conversations and collaborative pedagogical practice.

Finally, the new model must provide space for open

dialogue about the lived experiences of teachers taking on middle leadership roles in rural communities. There is an opportunity to leverage the current attention to AITSL's (2024) *Professional standards for middle leaders* to initiate generative discussions about leadership in rural schools by promoting the voices of rural leaders, connecting rural leaders, meeting with them, working alongside them and providing opportunities for them to impact professional development and policy making, for example by promoting teacher-led action research in rural schools, creating new spaces on social media platforms to promote rural voices, hosting events with a rural focus and ensuring educational leaders from rural communities are represented at key events and initiatives.

Educators must engage with the rural as more than just context, space and place if we are to abate notions of the rural as 'deficient' and 'different' and prevent them from determining the future experiences of Heads of English in schools. To address the current pipeline issues and workplace challenges and improve student outcomes, we must build the collective efficacy of middle leaders (Elliott et al., 2022). Reimagining rural leader dispositions is an important starting point.

Conclusion

This article has examined how middle leaders negotiate multiple subjectivities as they establish themselves in roles, and addressed a gap in the literature around middle leadership in rural and regional schools. A reimagining of the Head of English role in rural schools coincides with renewed research interest in rural education in general, and the complex, sensitive issues that surround leaders (and teachers) in this space. It advocates for disruptive leadership approaches, and a reflective practice that provides Heads of English with a voice and space to be agents of change. In this regard, the *Professional standards for middle leaders* (AITSL, 2024) provide a reference-point for future discussions around leadership and teaching English in rural schools.

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Rural Schooling Review

English Teaching, Rural Schooling: A Review-Essay

Bill Green, Charles Sturt University

Petrone, Robert, & Wynhoff Olsen, Allison. (2021). ***Teaching English in rural communities: Towards a critical rural English pedagogy.*** **Rowan & Littlefield.**

The recent publication of *Teaching English in rural communities* by Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen immediately caught my attention. Bringing together English teaching and rural education, it is one of the first full-length engagements of this kind, and as such it is both timely and important. Its focus is the United States, and more specifically the state of Montana, and it provides a fascinating insight into rural English teaching in that country. But it is undoubtedly of interest and value for rural English teaching in Australia too, and elsewhere, offering rich accounts of some of the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching English outside of metropolitan centres where much of the governing social and educational logics and values continues to be produced and policed, even now.

The last two decades have seen increasing scholarly attention given to rural education as a matter of interest and concern in its own right. Certainly in Australia, this attention is linked to a shift in social justice perspectives to the spatial, and a new awareness of place and location as factors in educational disadvantage. Important work has been developed with regard to rural schooling, distance education, rural teacher education and rural literacies, along with a new awareness of the possibilities involved in making closer connections in this regard with environmental and Indigenous education. As well, there has been growing interest in what are called 'rural knowledges', which clearly includes attention to curriculum, including the Australian Curriculum itself – Australia's first formal national curriculum. To date, however, there has been little in the way of specific and sustained attention to particular school subjects as being central to curriculum and schooling, especially in the secondary sector. This is why the book in question here is so significant, in its important and innovative focus on subject English in rural contexts.

Authored by two academics located in English teacher education at Montana State University, the book comprises framing chapters by Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen and, in between them, four chapters co-written by them and various English teachers in Montana high schools. These other authors are experienced practitioners who have all engaged in higher degree studies of various kinds, as well as being involved in Montana State's outreach program, including presumably its practicum. It is an excellent model, combining practitioner inquiry, professional development, teacher education and scholarship. Three of those chapters feature the main authors, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen, writing with at least one other author (Alli Behrens, Melissa Horner, Elizabeth Reierson and Catherine Dorian), while the fifth chapter – more conceptual in character – is co-written by them and Melissa Horner. The English teaching on display ranges from poetry and novel work in literary studies to writing pedagogy, and is focused on both personal and more analytical writing, embracing critical and racial literacies, as well as media and multimodality, and exploring issues of community, place, Indigeneity, history and/as colonialism, and (intergenerational) social justice. This is a *rich* version of English teaching at work, and in practice.

Equally interesting is the presentation of the rural across Chapters 2–4: the communities, the schools, the people and the histories. Montana itself is described as 'the 4th largest state' in the United States, with a 'low population density (ranked 3rd lowest after neighboring Wyoming and Alaska)' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. xi). This is presented elsewhere as follows:

> In Montana, issues of rurality are unavoidable. As the fourth largest state in terms of area (behind Alaska, Texas, and California, respectively), Montana ranks as the state with the third lowest population density in the United States (behind Alaska and Wyoming). Moreover, unlike many other states that are often thought of as rural (e.g., Nebraska, Kansas), *no major urban centers exist throughout the entire state*; even today, Montana is often referred to as a 'frontier' state. (Eckert & Petrone, 2013, p. 68; my emphasis)

Clearly the local university has a particular role to play here. Incidentally, it is worth reflecting on the fact that, as noted in the quote above, this is a state without 'major urban centers', which I understand to refer to large-ish towns as well as cities. The metropolis is elsewhere – located in other states, or else referenced to the overall space of the country as a whole. (I am reminded of Mike Corbett's 2007 classic *Learning to leave* as a symbolic register of a major impulse in rural education – in Montana, who stays, who goes?) Relatedly, there are several maps included in the book, which I welcome; as I have suggested elsewhere, visual representation is extremely important in discussing and comprehending the rural (Green & Reid, 2014). There isn't, however, one of the United States itself and Montana's relative location with it, which would certainly have been helpful for overseas readers such as myself. That said, it is disappointing that these maps are presented in grayscale, which cancels out their explanatory power. This is undoubtedly a limitation of the (print) book format, and a marker of publishing economies, but it is unfortunate, all the same. It is not simply a matter of preference, either, as important information is obscured in both Figure 3.1 (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 55) and the maps included in Chapter 5. After all, an important issue in rural education research is the significance of place and space, which are linked to distance, isolation, mobility and accessibility. While it may be that this information is readily available online, for me it was distracting.

An intriguing feature in Chapters 2 and 3 is the way in which rurality and Indigeneity respectively are directly thematised, and explicitly posed as objects of study in English classrooms. Chapter 5 focuses on 'race/ism' and rurality, and is an important argument more generally for folding questions and issues of race into rural education research and pedagogy. Here it is presented with reference to Montana and the United States, drawing attention as it does to the presence of Native American, Hispanic and African American populations within the total mix. It is argued that rurality is implicitly coded 'white', and that the dominant figure in representations and ideologies associated with the rural has long been marked by 'whiteness'. This is something that rings true for rural education in Australia too, where until quite recently a sharp division has tended to exist between thinking the rural and matters to do with Aboriginal education. This chapter is highly recommended for all involved in rural education, including rural English teaching.

Getting back to those earlier chapters, the book also raises a point that might well serve as a model for curriculum praxis: developing programs or units of study focused on Indigeneity and rurality. The latter, in particular, would be intriguing, and generative. Of course there would be little value in doing this as a 'once-off' – always a problem in and for teacher education – and it should be noted here that the book certainly doesn't present these 'themes' in such terms. Rather, it is made clear that they inform longer-term programming, which is to be understood as a form of curriculum intertextuality – the possibility of which is, in fact, enhanced the longer a teacher spends in rural settings, getting to know students through different phases of their schooling and as they grow up.

I was struck, too, by the way that the unit on Indigeneity, focused on Montana's Native American people, deliberately doesn't refer to rurality. This is informed by a realisation on the teacher-researcher's part that her predominantly white students were steeped in traditional, stereotypical ways of thinking about rurality, and that what was needed here was 'a more inductive approach to exposing rurality as a social construct' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 70). It is noticeable that, among other things, this involved addressing the issue of 'land' rather differently from usual considerations of place' (as in 'place-conscious education', etc., which has indeed become more common in rural education). Indeed, it is worth noting that the English classrooms we are given such rich access to here seem by and large remarkably homogenous in racial terms, which raises the vexed question of what it means to teach English in such circumstances with a view to challenging doctrines of

terra nullius or pursuing a decolonising 'reconciliation' project, especially post-Referendum. How to introduce 'black' curriculum in 'white' (English) classrooms? It is indeed one of the virtues of this present book that it provokes such questions.

Chapter 4 seeks to link 'local communities' to the English teaching work in question here. This is well worth looking into further, drawing in as it does other social considerations such as sexuality and identity, the 'fishbowl effect' of living in small communities, and the challenges of managing the lived contradictions of rural life – its pleasures as well as its problems. There is much to consider here, and it could be usefully drawn into rural teacher education and professional development – clearly in the United States, which is the focus of the book's authors, but also here in Australia, I suggest, where its US orientation might well serve as a useful distancing device, for instance in considering LGBTIQA+ aspects and issues.

I want to focus, however, on the framing chapters, in which Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen present their own project – their authorial agenda. Central to this is what they describe as 'Critical Rural English Pedagogy', somewhat unfortunately rendered as CREP. After positioning themselves – one a relative newcomer to a rural context and the other a rural English teacher of considerable experience who has transitioned into academia – they present their research agenda thus:

> The central questions driving our research were the following: What is it like to be an English teacher in a rural and remote community? What are the unique challenges and opportunities for learning and teaching English in these contexts? How can English teachers best be prepared and/or supported to work in these rural and remote schools? (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. xi).

Both clearly work organically from and with their rural location, and it matters that they do in terms of networks, acceptance, perspectives and values. Their own insight is deepened accordingly. They *recognise* the rural for what it is, and what it means to be teaching English in rural communities and settings. As they write:

> What became readily apparent to us in our research was that teaching secondary English in rural and remote areas is an extremely demanding job – one laden not only with traditional work demands unique to rural teaching but also often taxing psycho-emotional demands as well. (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. xii)

This applied equally, although differently, to both Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen as teacher educators and as researchers. For example, 'As part of this process, Robert [Petrone] had to grapple with unconscious biases he did not even know he had regarding rurality as a result of his own metro-centricity' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. xii) there's a lesson in that, incidentally, for those working in rural schools more generally, or moving into them. Wynhoff Olsen, on the other hand, is described as having a long history of involvement in rural schooling.

Returning to the book's organising framework, CREP is described as a 'framework for developing and implementing English curricula that centers rurality as an analytic focus for critical literacy practices' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 7). Social justice is thereby foregrounded, right from the outset – indeed, this is a socially-critical perspective. Hence 'In these ways, a CREP, like other critical literacy approaches … emphasizes textual consumption, production, and distribution in order to draw attention to power dynamics, representation, ideologies, social justice/equity issues, and activism' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 7). This is then directly turned to rurality as an object of concern – and to good effect, it must be said. At a later point, it is observed that there is no single identity or essence to CREP, and that indeed it is better understood 'not as a singular approach but rather as a set of pedagogies that adhere around the central aim of examining, particularly as they pertain to rurality, inequitable power dynamics, ideologies, issues of representation, and possibilities for social activism' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 121). However, I want to make two comments in this regard.

The first is to note that all this entails an originary view of subject English as always-already 'critical'. That's the starting point. I wonder about that. Reference is made at one point to what makes this book different in 'a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the unique challenges English teachers face in rural and remote communities' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 3):

> Whereas many approaches in rural English Education (as well as place-conscious pedagogies) emphasize making connections between school and community or drawing on the rural as a way to access students' funds of knowledge, CREP asks teachers and students to use their connections both to interrogate the place they call home *and* [to] examine broader notions of rurality. (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 120)

This suggests, for me, a distinction between this account and an existing rural English teaching – a

'normal' pedagogy, in effect. Which raises the question of *how does one get beyond that?* Is it a matter simply of *becoming* critical, as it were, and does that mean, in turn, that what happens in the meantime is somehow an interim state of incompleteness? This isn't really the concern of this book, and we must assume that the teacher-researchers on show here have gone through a process of change and development in learning their trade – something indicated, for instance, in the following quote: 'For the focus teachers, each had to immerse herself in her place to learn the values, experience the affordances, hear the silences, and notice the constraints *before and/or as* she implemented a Critical Rural English Pedagogy' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 121, my emphasis). But it is worth thinking about all the same. Is there a modernist, metronormative cast, shadow-like, to this version of subject English?

The second point I want to put on the record, not altogether unrelated, is that the possible implication of this is that rurality is *necessarily* subject to critique – or, at the very least, I want to say this is a stance needing to be rather carefully modulated. Is there an inference here that there is something inherently 'wrong' with rurality? What are the *possibilities* associated with the rural? With rural life and schooling? Again, the authors are properly vigilant in this and other regards, and I don't want to be seen as overly or unfairly critical. But it is reasonable to say that this is a book that needs to be supplemented by other accounts of English teaching and rural schooling – something it calls for itself, and indeed provokes and draws into being.

A further, final point: I was struck by the relative downplaying of reaction and resistance to the critical agenda that C[RE]P represents. Teaching against the grain, as advocated here and in other forms of critical literacy/pedagogy, often comes up against opposition – perhaps even more so in Trump's America, *or* in contemporary Australia, post-Referendum. Chapter 6 certainly raises such issues, observing that 'teachers' rural contexts create challenges when considering how to add criticality to an already present and overwhelming job' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 124). There's much left unsaid or still to say in this regard nonetheless, I suspect.

In closing, then, I commend this book for its innovation, its clarity and its courage. There are still few book-length studies in this area, whether approaching things from the side of rural education and schooling or that of English teaching, inside and outside the United States. Bringing them together in this fashion is extremely generative, and is to be wholeheartedly welcomed. As the authors write, the book 'proposes radical shifts to how teachers create and offer English curriculum in rural schools' (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 120). This it does, undoubtedly, but it is also the way in which it displays and demonstrates rural English at work, in practice, in these particular North American schools and communities that I think has to be highlighted here. We need more of such endeavours.

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English Teaching and *Listening from the Heart:* A Review

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Cara Shipp (2023). *Listening from the Heart: Rewriting the teaching of English with First Nations voices*, Australian Association for the Teaching of English.

The title of Cara Shipp's *Listening from the Heart: Rewriting the teaching of English with First Nations voices* captures the gentle warmth and proud understandings of First Nations cultures and identities underlying this rich resource for teachers of English. We come to this review as initial teacher educators and educational researchers. Both of us contributed vignettes of practice to the book and critically reviewed it prior to its publication. We are both avid users of the book, having applied various principles and approaches to the teaching of our initial teacher education (ITE) classes, some of which we share here. Throughout this review, we use 'I' where a story of experience relates to one of us personally (individually) and 'we' where we are co-writing.

In the context of two Australian universities, on the west and east coasts of Australia respectively, students have asked us questions about theoretical and practical considerations presented by 'superdiversity' (Li, 2021; Rigney, 2024) and the emergence of culturally responsive pedagogies as an educational priority in Australia. Our students have asked how to teach in a way that is impactful and culturally responsive and what the 'right thing' is for teachers of English to say and do when teaching texts by First Nations writers.

Trish: In a particular English Curriculum unit one day, a pre-service teacher shared his lack of confidence in teaching texts by First Nations writers as he felt he was not in the position, personally and politically, to discuss the texts or support students' learning. This initial teacher felt anxious about 'saying the wrong thing' and about 'messing it up', preferring to defer to his school's Aboriginal Education Officer who, he believed, had more authority to teach a particular First Nations poet than he did. This lack of confidence and professional knowledge is common to initial *and* experienced teachers. Feelings of angst and inadequacy can emerge from reflective practices, and these feelings stand alongside good intentions that can be addressed with professional learning and other teaching and learning exchanges. It is here that we see a natural entry point for *Listening to the Heart*.

How the book came about

In 2020, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) was looking to support teachers by publishing a text that developed their cultural understandings and offered practical applications of those understandings in teaching contexts. It was around this time that Alex Wharton was the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund's first Reading Australia Fellow, and he was examining Indigenous texts as part of the Fellowship project. At the same time, Red Room Poetry published *Guwayu: For All Times* (2020), an anthology by First Nations poets published in First Languages alongside English interpretations. It was the year in which the AATE conference, with its theme 'If', asked us to consider the possibilities and imagine potentialities of change.

In this context, the idea for *Listening from the Heart* emerged, and the plan became more concrete as teachers continued to ask

about ways of better teaching First Nations texts. Since the launch of the book at the 2023 AATE conference in Canberra (where it sold out), Shipp has presented seminars and workshops in several states and territories. While the book's popularity may be due to the timing of its release, it is more likely due to its strengths in simultaneously providing reassurance and practical strategies. Shipp provides her own version of how the seeds of the book were planted in the 'Author acknowledgements' (p. vii). Shipp also explains that the work that she and many First Nations educators does 'come from the heart: We expose our hearts a little, however perilously, every time we offer our cultural perspectives to a school. We often do this alone in our daily working lives, as the only First Nations representative in that school context' (p. vii). The vulnerability and strength evident in this extract is something we bring to our discussions of culturally responsive pedagogies in Teacher Education programs, and we have used the text in our Teacher Education courses, making use (in particular) of the chapters on pedagogies, terminology and vignettes.

Overview

Section 1 – Contexts

This first section on First Nations historical and cultural context, which introduces readers to uses of appropriate terminology and protocols, provides reassurance and shares valuable cultural understandings. Useful background information and fiction resources are included in this section to support teachers and students studying texts by First Nations authors. Shipp highlights the 'ever-evolving' nature of First Nations discourse and encourages English teacher readers to be as adaptable in this area as they are in all areas of language and culture.

We have adopted Shipp's suggestions for terminology throughout this review by referring to 'First Nations peoples' (plural) to reflect the diversity of language and cultural groups across Australia. Providing guidance around terminology reflects English teaching practice with references to the nuances of tense – for example, by avoiding references to First Nations peoples in the past tense and problematising uses of the term 'post-colonial' – and pronouns, with a reminder to avoid the colonial phrasing of 'our First Nations peoples', which 'reinforces the power relationship of coloniser over the colonised' (p. 14). Teachers are urged to closely examine texts and authors studied in the classroom, particularly in terms of the perspectives presented, to ensure that the voices of First Nations peoples are telling their own stories.

Jennifer: One of my favourite parts of this section is the critical literacy exercise: 'Why we need to put *Dougy* by James Moloney to rest'. Not only does this 'illustration of practice' critique the teaching of the novel *Dougy*, it also provides a model for critiquing other texts, including *Deadly, Unna?* by Phillip Gwynne, which I taught in my first year of teaching. Shipp's approach to critiquing *Dougy* gave me a deep dive into English teaching practice and prompted me to reflect on my past teaching practice, the changes I have made over the years, and different approaches I would adopt now. I am still learning, but that is encouraged in this book.

In the context section, I am reminded of my experiences of the generosity of First Nations Elders in sharing their knowledge. This generosity is replicated by Shipp, who shares ways of engaging with First Nations perspectives through her teacherly approach of encouraging risk-taking and accepting mistakes.

This approach is reflected in the discussion of the key protocols that teachers need to understand when working with First Nations perspectives. As with many of our school communities, genuine efforts and intentions, listening and relationship building are central to working with local First Nations communities. Shipp offers insights into cultural, mourning and working with community protocols that lead into considerations for selecting texts and engaging with student responses to texts. Many texts and resources are suggested for study and background knowledge; however, we would expect that English teachers would continue to research beyond these examples.

Section 2 – Pedagogies and Practice

Section 2 focuses on learning more about First Nations worldviews, how to interact with First Nations languages in First Nations texts, features of a culturally responsive classroom, cross-disciplinary approaches to exploring First Nations perspectives, and genre studies that work well with First Nations literature.

Trish: Two parts of this section I applied in my teaching of ITE students were Yarning Circles and 8-ways pedagogies. We formed Yarning Circles at different times of the semester, including ITE-led sessions where we experienced sitting in a circle (for us, on the floor), with no physical barriers, so that everyone is equal

and at the same level, and everyone can see each other clearly (pp. 104–107). As Shipp explains, 'By calling them Yarning Circles, we are acknowledging that this learning structure has been used by Aboriginal people for thousands of years' (p. 104). The ITE students were also enthusiastic to learn how to use the 8-ways pedagogy in their planning and practice (pp. 109–10). This pedagogical approach can be used by anyone in working with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and was developed by a team of Aboriginal Education Officers in the Western NSW Regional team in conjunction with academic Dr Tyson Yunkaporta from the Apalech clan of North Queensland (p. 108). Shipp includes a QR code to the related website and a graphic (p. 109) to guide teachers in planning the 8-ways pedagogy: story sharing, community links, deconstruct/reconstruct, non-linear, land links, symbols and images, non-verbal and learning maps.

Section 3 – Burning Questions

In this section, Shipp answers questions she is frequently asked, or often hears. The structure enables Shipp to integrate other teachers' voices seamlessly as they ask about practicalities to do with teaching First Nations' perspectives, as well as teachers' fears and indifference to teaching First Nations contexts, texts and perspectives. Significant here is that Chapter 10 ('Deeper questions and responses') begins with a section on 'My fear of getting it wrong', which was directly useful to recommend to the student who experienced this fear, described at the beginning of this review.

Trish: The user-friendly layout of this section, indeed the whole book, makes it easy to consult one question at a time and easily access the 'burning question' that is most relevant or immediately useful. My students expressed appreciation of the structural arrangement of this part of the text because of its clear 'Teacher/ Response' layout (pp. 127–131), the headings to indicate lists of resources, and the authentic scenarios that stood out in bolded italics. The tables, coloured covers, brief summaries and QR codes of recommended texts (e.g., pp. 41–45) caused an audible gasp of delight among the ITE students in my class. It was just what they were looking for. While Shipp provides these text recommendations throughout the book, in this final section, there are also two QR codes that link to a workshop presentation by Cara Shipp and Phil Page, and a podcast with Emma Jenkins and Nirvana Watkins from the VATE Village database (p. 136).

How we have used the book in Initial Teacher Education

Jennifer: In English Curriculum for ITE students, students were introduced to the statements and burning questions in Page and Shipp's original article – of the same name as her book – which appeared in *English in Australia* in 2022. These questions and statements were explored by students alongside the guidance on language and text selection provided in the book. This activity contributed to a dialogue about English teaching more broadly, as well as a sense of what a reflective practice could look like for the teaching of all texts and concepts. Being a part of this dialogue suggested ways into the process of working collaboratively towards greater cultural awareness and to contributing in a small way to Reconciliation. It gave us all a sense of the bigger role and responsibility of teachers to be informed and to educate.

Trish: In English Curriculum for ITE students, students were introduced to the authenticity scale to guide text selection (pp. 18–19) and to the outline of the 'Your Story Your Journey' resource (p. 20). These aim to improve teachers' understandings of First Nations' perspectives and support teachers in making culturally competent choices in their planning and teaching. Another relevant section is the Cultural Standards Framework (p. 99), which builds upon the brief overview of the Framework (p. 37) and the guide to developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (p. 40), both provided in Section 1. These are all relevant to teachers because they provide useful guidelines for working at the level of policy, significant because teachers are always working within class, faculty, school, system, and state contexts. In particular, the 'Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework' by the Western Australia Department of Education is presented (p. 99), and it was tremendously useful to show this set of continua to ITE students to help them consider their own school's journey along that continuum (from emerging to proficient) and for them to use in promoting growth in cultural understanding as a whole staff. To this end, Shipp encourages schools to connect with First Nations consultants to help them move to 'proficient' cultural responsiveness. The examples of staff development offered by Murrimatters (p. 99) and Leading with Strength (p. 100) identify skilled facilitators who can help schools build cultural competency, an invaluable resource for teachers and

schools who do not know where to find effective professional development in this area.

Conclusion

Shipp's book came to mind during Larissa Mclean Davies's Garth Boomer address at the Australian Association of Teachers of English conference in July 2024, in Adelaide. From the position of a white settler teacher, McLean Davies stressed that the process of 'unsettling English' involved far more than making changes to text selection, although this is one place to start. For English teachers seeking to go beyond merely choosing First Nations authors in their texts for study, Shipp's book offers ways to deepen all textual study with consideration for diverse and absent perspectives and the social function of a literary education. Beyond ideas of the 'exam as curriculum', Shipp's book not only provides ways of thinking and practical opportunities for teaching First Nations perspectives, it also highlights the 'centrality of Indigenous knowledges in Australia' (McLean Davies, 2024) as the context of an anti-colonial approach to English. There is potential for student voices to be present in these changes if they are supported to participate in the unsettling of English and, potentially, reverse the situation in which students who write on more traditional texts score higher in exams (McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2023). Shipp's book has the potential to support teachers to complexify First Nations texts, to explore their possibilities, and to find ways to develop rigorous and insightful student responses. Meanwhile, beyond curriculum, exam responses, and results, Shipp's book demonstrates the value of culturally responsive teaching and learning in preparing students to participate in Reconciliation.

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