

Abstract

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The subject English was first labelled with the title in South Australian primary schools in 1907 where it was created as a super-ordinate category for previously separate areas of study such as speech, writing, reading, spelling, grammar and poetry. English was one of a number of subjects in the curriculum, such as nature study, which were, at that time, being promoted as a way of developing an appropriate outlook on life and the knowledge and skills necessary for future worker-citizens.

This paper explores the relationship between English and the technology of schooling in a time of curriculum reform. It also investigates first moves into post-primary education by the state as it responded to a changing economy and growing international competitiveness. Its particular focus is on the English subject as it was developed for older students who stayed on at school beyond the compulsory level.

By the 1920s English was proclaimed as the central subject of schooling and the prime means of developing model future citizens. This paper attempts to identify discourses that were operating, often in conflict, to shape the English subject. It shows the contingent nature of the way the subject was shaped, thus enabling current conceptions of the subject to be problematised, and imagined otherwise.

The paper is based on a broader genealogical study of the adolescent, English and public schooling in South Australia – a 'history of the present' – which uses history to examine present day concerns about English (literacy) and young people. It will report on discourse analytic research conducted using curriculum and other texts of the period.