

Forming the English subject in early twentieth century South Australia

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Paper presented at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association Biennial Conference,
29 September to 1 October, 2001, Canberra ACT.

submitted for fully refereed conference proceedings

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Introduction

This paper discusses aspects of a larger study which researches the links between the early adolescent¹, schooling and the school subject English. The study uses as its starting point the central place the English curriculum has taken in schools for shaping the ideal the ideal citizen/worker-in-the-making (Doyle, 1989; Green & Beavis, 1996; Hunter, 1987; King, 1982; Peel, Patterson, & Gerlach, 2000). The focus of this paper is the kind of literate subject that was established as the ideal in the English curriculum and schooling in the first decade of the twentieth century (1900-1910).

Collins and Vickers (1999) identify three fields of ‘assumptions about reality’ which underpin school curricula and set the boundaries for what subjects can count as appropriate content and processes.

The assumptions about reality which matter most in a curriculum framework in this basic ‘world view’ sense of framework are, first, assumptions about the nature of young people and how they learn; second, assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the stuff from which the curriculum is made; and third, assumptions about what kind of knowledge it is important for young people to have by the time they leave school. This last set of assumptions about the aims, or desired outcomes, of the curriculum is heavily related to curriculum makers’ views about the relationship of the school as an institution to other ‘institutions’ - to families, to the local community, to a church other religious institution (sic), to employers and their spokespersons, to the formal political institutions of the State (at two levels in Australia), to ‘Australia’, as curriculum makers envisage it, and to the world beyond. (Collins & Vickers, 1999, p.1)

This study takes on the challenge offered by Collins and Vickers to open up curriculum theory and practice to an examination of the assumptions about young people, knowledge and learning outcomes upon which school subjects are built. I do this through an examination of the discourses which constitute the school subject English and the ideal student it seeks.

Why English?

I have chosen English as my curriculum ‘site’ for this study because of its long history and because this subject traditionally has been regarded as central to the role of the school curriculum of shaping the moral outlook of the pupil.

¹ In using the term ‘adolescent’ I am aware of it as a label developed in the first decade of the twentieth century (Hall, 1904) for describing a life-stage between childhood and adulthood. Like the ‘child’ and the ‘adult’, I see the ‘adolescent’ as a discursive production. The adolescent is constructed in psychological and medical discourses and through the practices of institutions such as schools and families. In the corpus of data used for this study, the term ‘adolescent’ was rarely used and a range of labels was used to distinguish this child who was older and staying on at school beyond the compulsory level of Class IV, or leaving school but not immediately getting work. and the terms ‘older child,’ ‘youth,’ ‘Class V pupil’ are used interchangeably with it.

In contemporary Australia, the subject English – and its various counter- and constituent-parts such as ‘reading,’ ‘spelling,’ ‘writing’ and, particularly, ‘literacy’ – is a site of anxiety about the adequacy of the curriculum in preparing students for the world after school. (for one instance of this see Kemp, 1999) For example, at present there are concerns about young people’s relations to the new forms of literacy generated by proliferating information and communication technologies – the spectre of porn on the web, of youthful cyber-hackers and pirates – as well as more traditional ‘texts’ such as television soaps and commercials aimed at young people. In response, there are calls for better assessment and accountability, ‘new’ basics (Queensland, 1999), new literacies, and critical literacies to help young people to face the new requirements of work and citizenship.

This tying together of English/literacy and young people as a site of anxiety and as the ‘pressure point’ at which schooling is judged for its effectiveness in preparing future citizens – a kind of acid test of the health of schooling in a way that the pulse rate is a measure of the health of the body (is the issue that is being traced historically. It is not just in the present that such a tying together occurs – in newspapers, for instance, literacy has been a focus for concern about schools and curriculum since world war 2 (Green, Hodgens, & Luke, 1994), and in that period there have been particular panics around the impact of (the then) ‘new’ texts such as television (Luke, 1990), and comic books (Finnane, 1989; Openshaw & Shuker, 1987) and calls on schools to respond.

The use of history

As a genealogy (Foucault, 1977; Hayes, 2000; Noujain, 1987; Rose, 1996a; Rose, 1996b; Tyler & Johnson, 1991; Visker, 1995), the larger study on which this paper is based is attempting to trace the descent of this ‘tying together’ of English, schooling and adolescents, to consider the forms it has taken and the conditions that have made such a linkage thinkable². This is not a traditional historical study which seeks to show the origins of this issue or explain how it led to its present day configuration. Rather, this study attends to its ‘fabrication’ at different times and to the continuities and discontinuities in this process of fabrication in an attempt to disrupt the taken for granted way in which these elements are put together in the present.

Genealogy focuses on disruptions and breaks in discourse; it is interested in relations of power more than relations of meaning, and; it draws upon the same documents used by historians whilst also referring to that which we tend to feel is without history-sentiments, love conscience and instincts. Some effects of genealogy are that it undermines particular historical configurations of power relations by targeting their already fractured, unstable and impaired form; it subverts the process of reiteration of regulatory ideals (Butler 1993); it questions how subjectivities are constructed and given meaning; it considers how discourses produce subjects with particular kinds of power

² Foucault called this process of tying together or linkage of issues a ‘problematization’ (Castel, 1994)

and capacities, and; it opens up new strategic theoretical possibilities. (Hayes, 2000, p.47)

Genealogy begins in the present with a ‘problematization,’ which involves a process of working with a problem (a question or set of practices which is the focus of attention) as it is currently constituted and tracing its genealogy or ‘descent.’ Thus a history of the present problematizes a practice or issue in the present by attending to the history of its transformations and its emergence (note the reverse of the usual ‘historical’ order here) as a problem worthy of attention (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1986, pp.118-25). Dean (1994, p.21) describes this as the development of ‘critical and effective’ histories which “reflect upon the contingency, singularity, interconnections, and potentialities of the diverse trajectories of those elements which compose present social arrangements and experience.” The implication here is that the particular role of traditional history has been to fabricate seamless representations of the production of present arrangements, something which a genealogist attempts to unpick and to show how things could have been otherwise:

[I]f the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is “something altogether different” behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms (Foucault, 1977, p.142).

In its opposition to traditional historical method, genealogies attend to discontinuity, to accidents and the mundane (Cormack, 1998). Dean (Dean, 1994, p.20) labels genealogies as ‘critical’ because of the way they seek to disrupt what is taken for granted or seen as ‘normal’ in the present day. These histories focus on the practices and techniques by which human subjects have been shaped (Rose, 1996b) and not just the ideas and knowledges that have been brought into play in this process. Such a focus steers the historian towards a study of the ‘improper’, the ‘delinquent’, the ‘diseased’, because it is out of concern for these that notions of normality, their accompanying grids of specification and the ‘technologies’ that shape human subjectivity, typically have been developed (Rose, 1996b, p.131).

The genealogical approach to the study of history refuses the unity of subjects (eg child, citizen), institutions (eg school, hospital), and ideas (eg democracy, sanity), noting that, being constituted within discourses, they are the *effects* of particular (historical) practices. These subjects/institutions/ideas are not transhistorical in the way that traditional historical narratives constitute them, through the ways they describe their formation, their development and their emergence. There is no (human) subject, for example, that exists outside of discourse that can be tracked in its various changing modes:

One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in

relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history (Foucault, 1980, p.117).

Foucault did more than study the history of ideas, he focussed on the mundane and programmatic aspects of history. He was interested in the transformation of the ‘moral technologies’ (Foucault, 1991) – the ‘practices’ – by which populations are shaped and disciplined.

[T]hese types of practice are not just governed by institutions, prescribed by ideologies, guided by pragmatic circumstances – whatever role these elements may actually play – but possess up to a point their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and ‘reason’. It is a question of analyzing a ‘regime of practices’ – practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect (Foucault, 1991, p.75).

It is in this field of *practices* - regimes of local, mundane, contingent ways of doing and saying things that connect differentially with theories, plans and policies – that I am most interested in relation to schooling and curriculum. I examine English as a site of such practices in schools and as a form of human technology which attempts to shape young people into particular ways of being. In this way, my analytic perspective is built upon poststructuralist theories of the subject and subjectivity. I am not taking as my starting point a liberal-humanist view of young people as unitary subjects. I am not trying to say what it was ‘really’ like for them, nor am I assuming that there are essential or foundational features of the child that lie behind or beyond the discourses of curriculum and schooling waiting to be identified. So I am not seeking a child that English and the curriculum repressed or ignored or brought into the light of reason, rather I am seeking to track the historical construction of a child subject (Poster, 1997). Following Weedon (1987), I see subjectivity as formed within and in response to discourses and institutional practices.

The discursive constitution of subjectivity addresses and constitutes the individual’s mind, body and emotions. Subjectivity is most obviously the site of consensual regulation of individuals. This occurs through the identification by the individual with particular subject positions within discourses. ... Discourses, as realized in institutional practices, for example in the family and the school, constitute the meaning of the physical body, psychic energy, the emotions and desire, as well as conscious subjectivity. They define individual identities and the forms of pleasure derived from them. (Weedon, 1987, pp.108-109)

In this paper I focus on the form of the subject being sought through the English curriculum. I ask “What are the objectives of all this work upon the human being, what subject form do they seek to produce: what are the images or exemplars of ideal persons promoted or assumed by these practices?” (Rose, 1996a, p.310) This work therefore seeks to contribute to curriculum history by exploring school subjects as a matter of concern for the field and to consider the issue of literacy as a curriculum topic that is related to the history of subject English. (Reid, 1984)

The data used in the study

I have chosen the first decade of the twentieth century as the period in which to focus this inquiry because this is the time in which English was first formed as a subject³ and therefore a place where a process of curriculum ‘fabrication’ of the subject might be visible. I use the English curriculum as a site for considering the play of discursive and non-discursive practices in shaping the student subject. I view the curriculum as a text as well as a process and a practice. I treat curriculum texts in the way that Ball (Ball, 1994, p.16) sees policy texts - as “not necessarily clear or closed or complete.” Indeed I see them as sites of tension where competing discourses may clash and as fields of play where multiple discourses may co-exist, overlap or even be unaware of each other’s existence.

This awareness of the multiplicity of discourses led to the use of the *Education Gazette* (hereafter the *Gazette*), published by the Education Department of South Australia as the key data source for this study, alongside the more ‘official’ statements of policy such as the education regulations and courses of instruction. The *Gazette* was produced monthly and forwarded to every teacher in the state. It contained, among other things, extracts from conference speeches, announcements of regulations, articles, extracts from inspectors’ reports, tips and hints for teachers, official statistics and lists, curriculum guides, and reports of teacher association meetings. The more I read the *Gazette*, the more I realised that I was in the equivalent of Central Station for discourses – where official texts were placed alongside commentaries, complaints and entreaties to teachers, notices about events and all the other texts necessary to run a widely dispersed education system. While the ‘official’ voice was dominant, it was far from univocal as different discourses competed to speak the truth about teaching and curriculum. Also detectable in this text were the echoes of practice (exemplary and problematic, everyday and special), and alternative ways of seeing the world of curriculum and teaching. The *Gazette* seemed an ideal site for the application of critical discourse analysis that was alert to the possibilities of multiplicity of discourses and flows of power from ‘below’ as well as from ‘above.’

English 1900-1910

As noted above, the English subjects were separate entities in the curriculum until 1907 when they were grouped together under the label ‘English.’ In 1907 these subjects which became sub-components of English were:

³ The 1907 Course of Instruction (Education Department of South Australia) was the first to group formerly separate subjects of reading, spelling, grammar, language, poetry etc under the heading of ‘English’ (Cormack, 2001) although the term ‘English’ had been used as far back as 1885 as an over-arching label for ‘composition’ and ‘grammar’. Thus in SA government schools, English was a *primary* school subject before it was a *secondary* school subject, an issue that has not been fully explored in curriculum histories of the subject (for comment on this see Patterson, A ‘English in Australia: Its emergence and transformations’ in Peel et al., 2000, p.291).

- Clear and distinct articulation. Correct speech.
- Reading
- Writing
- Spelling
- Oral and written composition
- Grammar
- Poetry (*Gazette* 1907, p.44)

These subjects/subcomponents were not themselves always stable within the curriculum⁴. For example at Class V level, the subject ('speech' (appears for the first time in 1907, although some elements in this curriculum were handled within a subject known as 'Language prior to that. Poetry appeared in 1878. Grammar appeared in the first course in 1874, was removed as a separate label in 1888, although elements were continued under the label "Language," and reintroduced in 1907. The subject/component labels "(oral and written) composition", "language," "grammar," and "speech" were the most fluid and each contained elements of each other with a focus around the study and production of oral and written language. The various subject labels for the English subjects are shown in table 1 (over) for the period 1874 – 1917.

The period of this study, therefore, was one of some changeability in regard to subject labels in the lead up to 1907. After that there was great stability of component labels. For the purpose of this analysis, I focussed on the first decade of the twentieth century in the time immediately preceding and after the introduction of 'English' as an overarching entity.

⁴ The curriculum was provided in the education regulations and called the "Standard of Proficiency for Scholars" from 1874. In 1876, the first year that the education department published a curriculum it was called a "Programme of Inspector's Examination." From 1886 it was called a "Course of Instruction."

Table 1: English subject labels 1874-1917* for Class V

Year	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Poetry	Com- position	Language	Grammar	Speech
1874	➤	➤	○	○	○	○	➤	○
1875	➤	➤	○	○	○	○	➤	○
1878 ^a	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	○	➤	○
1879	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	○	➤	○
1885	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤ ^b	○	➤ ^b	○
1888	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤ ^b	○	➤ ^b	○
1890	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤ ^c	X	○
1892	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	X	○
1900	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	X	○
1907	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤ ^d	X	➤	➤
1908	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1909	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1910	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1911	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1912	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1913	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1914	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1916 ^e	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤
1917	➤	➤	➤	➤	➤	X	➤	➤

○ = Not appeared as a subject to date

➤ = Appears as a subject this year

X = omitted this year

^a Courses were published in 1876 and 1877 but there were no Class V courses in these first years of the Education Department

^b Composition and Grammar were bracketed together under the heading of English

^c The label “Language” incorporated the formerly separate subjects of composition and grammar from this year

^d Now called *Oral and Written Composition*

^e Class V is called Grade VII from 1916 (Grade VII incorporates syllabus from Class IV and V)

Data analysis

The curriculum materials and the Education Gazette for this period were read to consider the key subject positions being made available for young people as students in the English subjects and the associated practices in which they were to engage. Such analysis provides a way of examining the kinds of assumptions about the nature of young people, learning, and schooling that Collins and Vickers (1999) assert underpin all curricula. The analysis also provides the starting point for identifying and placing in relation to each other some of the practices that were used to produce or even resist these subject positions.

My analytic process was to read thoroughly the curriculum statements and the *Gazette* for the period of the first decade – with excursions into the periods preceding and following this decade. I noted instances where the (older) child was talked about or made a subject or object of curriculum or school practice with a focus on the English subjects. I paid particular attention to those places where the child or a practice attracted a surfeit of words – for example, places where a problem was being addressed, or where the writer was clearly making an attempt to persuade the teacher reader. I also attended to the mundane duties, the ideas that seemed to go without saying, and the terms that served to monotonously mark accepted practices and ideas throughout the period.

The child subject as an object of pedagogical knowledge and practice in subject English

The practices most often mentioned in the various texts that made up the curriculum and the *Gazette* – such as the inspectors’ reports, articles, speeches – were related to reading (both oral and silent), writing and speaking. Over the first decade it was reading (as both school subject and as practice) that stood out as central to how students were to be in school. I have identified seven reading, writing and speaking practices that provided a range of subject positions for the child in school. The first five relate to reading, while the last two relate to writing and speaking. They are:

- Embodying the literate person (reading aloud)
- Accessing the storehouse of great thoughts - reading the world through English eyes
- Touching the soul – reading as access to an emulable self
- ‘Establishing the reading habit’ – reading as exercise and recreation
- Regulating the self - reading for citizenship
- ‘The closest attention to every minute detail’ – writing as drill
- Eliminating the ‘Australian twang’ – speaking as the mark of learning

Not all the practices noted were within the official boundaries of the English subjects for, as was often noted, the ‘mother tongue’ was used in all subjects and could be deployed as part of pedagogical practice across the school day.

For the purposes of this paper, I propose to focus on the first two of these subject positions in order to illustrate some of the discourses that were at work in the curriculum and to consider some of the practices that were employed in producing the ideal student.

As the following discussion argues, the subject positions identified are, to some extent at least, contradictory. They are sometimes placed awkwardly in relation to each other in the curriculum as if each was unaware of the existence of others. I’m very aware that my ‘reading’ of these positions is produced out of late twentieth century theories and methodological practices and that their incompatibilities and intersections are available only as a product of this analysis. However, one can only wonder at how teachers and students might have managed their competing demands, or resolved their different challenges, assuming they tried to take up aspects of the positions made

available. Clearly these various practices and subject positions did not make for a cohesive plan to shape an ideal student, rather, constituted by competing and overlapping discourses, they can be seen as contradictory and partial outcomes of various discourses and programs that constituted schooling at the time.

Embodying the literate person (reading aloud)

One of the ritualistic parts of the inspectors' reports that were reprinted in extracts in the *Gazette* each year was the comment on reading.

Reading.- Improvement is still to be desired. More fluency and a better grouping of words, coupled with voice inflection, are needed to produce the desired effect. (*Smyth Gazette* 1900 p.47)

No other aspect of the curriculum attracted such consistently troubled commentary in report after report, year in year out. In the early years of the department it was common practice in curriculum statements to simply list the reading book from which the exam would be taken at each year level. There was no specification of the way in which that text was to be read – but inspectors more than made up for this omission in their reports. Possibly this only seems an omission from a present perspective where 'oral' reading has to be marked and silent reading is the unmarked norm – presumably in the 1870s it went without saying that this was reading of the text out loud to the teacher. In the 1879 course, eight words were placed before the statement of the text to be read, presumably to clarify for teachers *how* the text was to be read aloud.

To read with ease and expression from the Fifth Royal Reader or equivalent, or a passage from a newspaper (Program of Inspector's Examination 1879, emphasis added)

The ritualistic complaints about the quality of reading – it constantly was needing improvement, 'appearing to improve,' 'not well taught,' subject to 'faults' etc – highlighted it as a key site for the inspector when examining students (as they did until the middle of the 1900s when the head teacher took over) or inspecting the quality of the teaching. In 1902 (*Gazette*, p.124), responding to the fact that the Inspector would no longer conduct the exams on all children in all schools, in which reading was a central subject, Inspector Whillas noted that he would, "judge the success of the instruction by noticing the conduct of the children during the ordinary lessons, whether the attention is keen or languid, whether the children are careful and industrious or idle and slovenly." This comment alerted me to review the comments on reading aloud to see how much they attended to the students' bodies. This analysis demonstrated that reading was a production of the student body – where strict attention was paid to how students held their body and to what they did with their bodies in producing a reading.

When examining reading an inspector notes how the child stands, his manner of holding the reading-book, and the distance of the book from the eyes. (McBride 1908, p.270)

Inspector McBride's comment shows how the position of the body in relation to the text was monitored. This was seen to be a crucial aspect of reading as well as the appropriate pronunciation and articulation of words. This issue brought about a

minute consideration of the use of the mouth and tongue, and attention to breathing even to the extent of having “mouth drill,” or “dumb-bell exercises for the mouth.” (Martin, *Gazette* 1901, p.85)

Reading aloud had not been well taught. It was characterized by slovenliness, faulty phrasing, and poor expression. It did not strike the teachers that voice-training was necessary. I suggested that breathing exercises, practice in vowel sounds, exercises in words beginning with *h* and *wh*, and in such expressions as *when he had*, and *he six stones*, &c., should be given daily before reading lessons. Where the teacher paid strict attention to voice-production the results were remarkably good. (McBride, *Gazette* 1908, p.271)

Experience shows that the majority of teachers altogether underestimate the value of making every child thoroughly conversant with the sound of every consonant, vowel, diphthong, and combination. If this be done the power to read will come almost spontaneously. (Course of Instruction 1907, p.45)

Thus, the ‘power to read’ was the result of an appropriate bodily production of the text via stance, breathing, pausing and pronunciation. Pausing received much attention and students were to deliver the reading in a way that matched the author as if he spoke the words on the text. The use of the male form here is deliberate in order to highlight the way that authorship of reading material in general, and any authors cited, were almost always marked as masculine.

The emphasis on the appropriate delivery of the performance of reading led to some inspectors recommending a separation of the eyes from the book so that they could attend to the audience. That is, the child was, from time to time, to look away from the book in order to achieve an appropriate performance of the reading. The absent presence in all these words about oral reading was the *listener* who includes the reader but also includes the inspector, the teacher and an appreciative audience. The point of reading is the reproduction of the words of the author in a way that embodies the message. The following extended quotation from Inspector Burgan shows the line of reasoning here, arguing that reading is about attending to ideas, not words,

... I must say that children generally look for words and not ideas, and their great desire is to utter these glibly and without due regard for their sense. Their eyes, too, all the time are on the book; whereas, to speak with ease and in a natural and effective way, they should be frequently raised, so that they could speak well above the book. They should get their thoughts from the book, but give themselves perfect freedom when uttering the same. I believe that adoption of this method would revolutionize the teaching of reading, and make it, in a short time, one of the best subjects taught in our schools. The process would at first be slow, but it would be sure and effective. I recommend all teachers to try it. The improvement in articulation, emphasis, and expression will soon convince them that it is worth following, and that under it the difficulties connected with the teaching of reading would disappear as if touched by a magician’s wand. No art, except perhaps music, is better calculated than that of reading to give pleasure to all, for everyone can appreciate great thoughts fitly expressed. Shakespeare’s direction to the players, “to speak the speech trippingly on the tongue,” applies aptly to reading. (Burgan, *Gazette* 1904, p.134)

Four years later, in 1908, Inspector Burgan built on this view, this time using the notion of children forming pictures, and pausing at each picture as they read. The term, however, that occurs more often than either reading ‘ideas’ or ‘pictures’ is that of grasping the ‘thought’ content of the text. Thus, verbal accuracy was not necessarily a key to a proper reading. As was stated in the 1907 Course of Instruction, “Reading is not a mere repetition of meaningless words. The matter of vital importance is that the child should grasp the thought involved in the words, and should cultivate in interest in so doing. Such reading, therefore, as betrays grasp of the content is more to be sought than mere verbal accuracy.” (p.45)

In practical terms, the emphasis on (oral) reading as an embodied performance of the thoughts of the author must have been a difficult practice to employ in the classroom of the early 1900s. In large schools, classes of 70 or more were standard, and in small schools, four or five different classes of students had to be managed by one teacher simultaneously. In these circumstances providing the teacherly audience for the individual reader would have been an onerous task.

There are hints in the *Gazette* that reading was rarely conducted in this way as indicated by the repeated complaints of the inspectors in their reports. Also, occasionally inspectors noted some of these non-desired practices, if only to try to restrict their use. For example, Inspector Maughan (1902, p.160) commented on the practice of ‘simultaneous reading’ as possibly “necessary where classes are large, but, except with very skilful usage, it leads to dull monotony.” Based on the evidence of the *Gazette*, ‘simultaneous reading’ was reading aloud conducted by the whole group/class in unison. This could be preceded by the teacher modelling the reading by ‘patterning’ or giving the students a sense of how to group words, pause etc. Inspector McBride defined the practice in the negative thus:

I cannot report that this subject has been well taught in all schools. The method used has been quite contrary to the right one. The wrong method has many adherents. Teachers read a passage from a book, explain it, give a pattern, allow loud simultaneous reading, stop children in the middle of a phrase to correct some slight error, and so on. Until they realize that comprehension of the matter is of *primary* importance, that phrasing with deliberation will lead to fluency and suitable expression – briefly, that the golden rule for reading aloud or silently is “Take your time,” I do not think that this subject will be so much appreciated by children as it should be. (McBride, *Gazette* 1906, p.251)

It is likely that the oral performance of reading in the manner so sought after by the Inspectors was a focus in the examination of the older children, once students had mastered basic word recognition. For these students, to read successfully was to perform the reading as a spoken text in a manner that conveyed the ‘thought content’ to the examiner/listener – the meaning followed the appropriate oral production of the text, it did not precede it. There is evidence that this bodily performance of reading was a mark of social location. It was as if the reader had to be someone who could comfortably converse with the author as an equal in taste and knowledge as is reflected in this comment by Inspector Burgan.

No doubt comprehension is the weak point in the reading; but the reproduction of the passage read ought to remedy this defect. To quote once more from Burrell - "The very best reading, like the very best acting, cannot be taught. It presupposes a love of the subject, a taste and a gift for it, an nice discrimination of lines and shades of the human voice, an appreciation of the fine in literature, and a certain amount of general knowledge. (Burgan, *Gazette* 1908, p.253)

The responsibility for the examination of pupils in the annual examination was passed from the inspectors to the head teacher in this decade. However, the inspectors continued to examine pupils for the compulsory standard at the end of Class IV and the older Class V students. We can picture the pupil standing before the inspector being examined for their two points for reading. As it said in the 1907 Course of Instruction: "For the first mark, the children will be tested by a passage taken from the IV. Class *Children's Hour* or "Simple Studies in English History," or any other approved book. For the second mark, as in Classes II, III., and IV. [for expression and comprehension]" This examination was a reading of the body, of the voice, and of the 'taste and gift' for reading that was to be read from those intangibles described by Inspector Burgan.

It is clear that this practice of examination and the focus on the oral performance of the text remained important in the years following the first decade of the century. However, in 1917, the President of the South Australian Public School Teachers Union attacked this practice, especially in the higher grades. By this time, it appears, the practice and examination of oral reading could be relegated to the early years of school because of the new emphasis on *silent* reading. In 1917, to read in the manner so desired by the inspectors of a decade earlier could be dismissed as merely 'producing a nation of elocutionists,'

Just now, great stress is being laid on silent reading, and rightly so. But quite oblivious of the fact that nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand of men and women derive their pleasure and solace and instruction from silent reading, the test remains the same - To read, with fair fluency and good expression, a certain number of lines from a prescribed book. This may be necessary in the lower grades, but unless the aim is to produce a nation of elocutionists, it surely might be dispensed with in the higher. Moreover, the test is not infallible. A boy may read fluently and with excellent expression, and have but a very hazy idea of the matter read; while another may stumble over his words, forget all about modulating his voice, and have an intelligent grasp of the subject matter. ... Let us have silent reading by all means, but let the test be *on* silent reading. ... The ultimate test of any method of teaching this subject must be, Does it engender in the scholar a love for reading? Judged by that test, our treatment of the subject has largely failed. (President's Address 1917, p.136)

This quote indicates that the view of reading as oral performance was to change after the first decade of the century – an interesting fate for a practice which was so much the focus for attention of inspectors and curriculum in the period I studied. If nothing else, this demonstrates the potential fragility of curriculum and pedagogical practices that educators may hold dear from time to time. I have argued in another place (Cormack, 2001) that the move to silent reading arose in part out of the different resources made available in the classroom that required a different shaping and

examination of the student. However, my focus here is to remain in the first decade of the twentieth century and to consider what other subject positions were being made available by the curriculum of the period. The focus on reading as access through oral performance to the ‘great thoughts’ of men suggested that *what* students were to read was as important as how they were to read it. It is to this aspect of the curriculum that I now turn.

Accessing the storehouse of great thoughts - reading the world through English eyes

The focus on the ‘thought content’ of the text being read and reproduced during oral reading was related to an understanding of the nature of the texts that should be read in the English curriculum. For if ‘reading’ was the act of being the oral conduit for the ‘thoughts’ of the author, then it followed that great care was needed in the selection of the authors and texts to be so performed. And who were to be these authors? These were the ‘great men’ who provided access to the heritage of ideas from the past. The following quote provides an idea of how these great men were to influence the reader. It is extracted from an address entitled ‘Education: A Practical Ideal’ delivered at the Annual Prize Distribution at an English Grammar School – Dunstable – and reproduced in the *Gazette*.

A pure love of reading is one of the most precious gifts of true education. Through the companionship of books great men talk to us, pour their souls into ours, share with us their loftiest aspirations, their highest thoughts, their purest ideals. In the mirror of their minds we see and judge our own most truly. Books are the voices of the distant or the dead speaking in our ears, making us heirs of the life of past ages; they are the truest levellers, for they make no distinction between rich and poor, employer and employed. they give us however humble may be our lot, if we will but use them faithfully, the society of the best and the wisest of the human race. (Prothero, *Gazette* 1910, p.86)

It is the metaphor of literature (including poetry) as a ‘store’ or ‘storehouse’ of noble or great ideas that is commonly called up in discussions of what children are to read as in this example in Inspector Maughan’s report for the 1901 school year.

“Reading maketh a full man,” said Bacon. Because the noblest thoughts of great men are enshrined in their writings, and because, too, abundant stores of exact information are only to be acquired by the study of books, the subject of reading is of vast importance. (Maughan 1902, p.134)

What was this storehouse of ideas and information and what work was it to do? The question of what students were to read about was linked to conceptions of the kind of person the reader was to be and, especially, to appropriate sensibilities or to ways in which they were to ‘read’ the world. In one of the first entries of the 1900 *Gazette*, the Board of Inspectors (p.82) reflected at length on the problem facing a secular school system in working with all classes of children – not just those of the middle class. They quoted Matthew Arnold as rejecting the notion that mere *information* from science would be enough to ensure that the working classes rise beyond their “ignorance” and argued that the people must be “moralised ... through letters, poetry, and religion” if they were to have the appropriate dispositions towards that

information and use it wisely. However, as the Board of Inspectors pointed out, a secular system had no recourse to religion. Instead, they said, the State must rely on “the refining culture which comes of reading and digesting the best thoughts of the best writers, past and present.” Citing the 17th century pedagogue Comenius, they noted that the result of this refinement through reading was to train “men to all which is human.”

In the same year, Inspector Neale, made a parallel comment about the teaching of poetry and went on to describe some of the practices that may accompany this training.

In the absence of formal religious teaching, the poetry lesson gives the best opportunity of touching the higher realms of the children’s souls; but in most instances “poetry” means saying verses and explaining the unusual words. I should like to see the material setting of the poem, with its historical and geographical details, fully illustrated with pictures and maps, by which time the new words would have been talked into the children’s vocabulary. Then, with this knowledge, and, if necessary, the key of the poem, the children should be led to feel the hidden meaning - the spiritual beauty, for which there is no adequate expression. Sometimes I see a class so taught; I wish it was an ordinary experience. (Neale, *Gazette* 1900 p.83)

For Neale, poetry becomes a portal, in the guiding hand of the teacher, to spiritual insight. Via concrete illustration with pictures and maps, the children *see* the world that is represented by the words of the poem. Through the ‘key’ provided by the teacher they can open their souls to its beauty⁵. Thus reading involves training in a particular aesthetic which is primarily built around visualisation (this may be related to the pausing at the ‘pictures’ required by Inspector Burgan in the previous section). Such training in the ‘higher’ realms of taste and judgement was one of the major reasons for the study of literature, but not the only one. In 1906 the *Gazette* reproduced from *The Australian Journal of Education* the text of an address given on “The teaching of literature in the kindergarten and lower forms of school” by Margaret Hodge to the Public School Teachers’ Association (Parramatta Branch). Literature has value in the primary school in five ways, she argued, as it was:

- valuable as information
- an interpreter of the world around us
- training for the mind/imagination
- training in taste and judgement
- a potent factor in moral development (summarised from Hodge, *Gazette* 1906, p.142)

Just as did the Board of Inspectors, Hodge linked the training of taste to moral development – one followed the other. Literature “widens and elevates our sympathies, ennobles our ideals; indeed, it forms the firmest foundations for the ethical training.” (Hodge, *Gazette* 1906, p.142)

⁵ There are obvious implications for the teacher in this – as a reader of literature and as someone who finds such hidden meanings – which are not the focus of this paper.

It was an English moral sensibility and aesthetic sense that was being sought here, emphasising the *Englishness* of English as a subject. Literature, as I have said, was a training in seeing the (English) world. Inspector Whitham, for example argued that “if our history and topography were all forgotten almost all that is of value in them could be reproduced from the beautiful poems which are the rich inheritance of our English race.” (Whitham, *Gazette* 1907, p.206) There are occasional examples in the *Gazette* of a love for the English pastoral aesthetic. The most interesting of these was contained in an address by the director to the South Australian Public Teachers Union where he reported on his study tour to Europe and England with Tate, the then principal of the Teachers College in Victoria. In it he described England in rapturous terms:

While you were holding your meetings here last year I was away realizing the hope of a lifetime, visiting the “old grey mother of the northern sea,” seeing something of the spots made sacred by the memory of her mighty sons; lingering, for all to short a time, in places hallowed by many memories; rushing through country scenes so lovely that one longed to play the truant and loiter there; threading the mazy, winding ways of quaint old towns and great industrial cities ... (Director *Gazette* 1908, p.205)

The ‘mighty sons’ referred to by the Director, clearly included the writers and poets who had made England, in the minds of men such as the director, a “placid, pastoral paradise.”

Mr Tate and I were journeying from London to Aylesbury ... That day, the sun had decided not to hide himself in sulky gloom behind great murky banks of clouds, but shone out brightly, lighting up the “meadows trim with daisies pied,” showing the tender growth of oak, elm, beech and birch in all the glory of spring. Bucks – home of Hampden and Milton – that day was at its best: a placid, pastoral, paradise. (Director *Gazette* 1908, p.205)

This vision of beauty was that being sought in and through literature. It was, literally, a training in seeing the world through an English sensibility. For example in a speech by Melbourne University Professor Drummond, extracted in the 1910 *Gazette*, he urged the reading of English art critic Ruskin, who did so much to promote the work of English rural artist Turner (Landow, 2000). Ruskin is praised as someone who will:

... help a man to the use of his eyes. Anybody can be put up to this in a few minutes. Go out into the country on Saturday and stop at the first ploughed field. At first you will see nothing but an ugly ploughed mass. When you look again, it is a rich amber colour, with probably two feet of coloured air moving over it. the ploughed field is really a glowing mass of beautiful colour. When I was a little boy, I wondered why God made the world so dingy. I saw in Ruskin that the colours as they are in nature are most perfectly beautiful, and that by no possibility can they be changed to advantage. (Drummond, *Gazette* 1910, p.86)

The beautiful landscape of England, and its poets and writers were placed in contrast to the position of the ordinary Australian child and man. In this sense of location, literature was seen to provide a space beyond the assumed squalid nature of everyday existence of the (rural, poor, working class) student of public schools or – perhaps as

suggested by Drummond above – a way of *seeing* it differently. As such literature was meant to act as a kind of life-time prophylactic against the material world – “to raise us above pounds, shillings, and pence” as Inspector Whitham put it. (*Gazette* 1907, p.206)

[If] an appreciative taste for reading during respite from labour is created, the working man is put in possession of the most effective instrument for sweetening his life, and raising himself almost unconsciously to a higher level. ... if the working man is not to stagnate, and expose himself to the dangers that usually accompany stagnation in the moral as well as the material world, he must read, and read as regularly as he can. ... Reading is an educational, but still more a moral force. (Taken from a section entitled “Gleanings – Reading” in which an extract from “Memories Grae and Gay,” by John Kerr is given, *Gazette* 1907, p.168)

This excerpt from Kerr’s memoirs, reproduced in the *Gazette*, positioned literature as providing a higher place of respite and beauty. As Hodge said in the *Gazette* (1906, p.142), “what a debt of gratitude do we not owe to that study, which carries us so completely out of ourselves, which enables us, if only for a time, to cherish great and noble thoughts, to rid ourselves of the haunting spectres, the spot upon our sunshine, the shadow of ourselves.”

The classroom practices that may have been associated with this subject position were more difficult to identify than the position itself. As can be seen from the examples given, many of these comments seemed to be as much about adults’ (the inspectors’ and teachers’) lives and desires as about what children would do. Here literature was positioned as art and something that happened internally – in contrast to the bodily display of oral reading. One way the teacher or inspector would have had of knowing what the students were taking from the thoughts of great men would have been to question them on their reading and this practice certainly took place. There is some evidence, for example from this comment by Inspector West, that the bodily performance so valued in reading aloud was also valued in answering questions on the text.

In one of my schools there is a clear and distinct enunciation, good inflection and modulation, well-rounded sentences, and confidence, spontaneity (sic), and fulness in answers. The children stand erect, look the questioner squarely in the face, and are not ashamed or afraid to give expression to their thoughts. (West, *Gazette* 1910, p.15)

Beyond such questioning, in the *Gazette* most attention was focussed upon the reading material that was to be selected and made available to children. In his speech to the South Australian Public School Teachers Union in 1903, the Inspector-General talked about the need for schooling to go beyond its traditional focus on training the child’s intellect (the first five ‘windows to the soul’) to “open a sixth window in the souls of children” and engage in the moral development of the child. (*Gazette* 1903, p.102). For him the key subject available to teachers for this work was that of reading where “the optional reading book may be turned to good account.” (p.102) This optional book referred to the possibility of the teacher bringing additional texts into the curriculum to supplement the official reader for the year and to extend the amount

of reading students did. He went on to identify three kinds of books which could be used for this purpose. First there were books ‘for information:’

We may call these the literature of knowledge. They differ in the actual value of the information they contain, and also in their style. Some of them are comparatively worthless and uninteresting to children. The typical boy wants books “with stuff in them,” as he calls it; and his idea of “stuff” rises as his reading advances. Of this kind of literature are historical stories, descriptions of the life and customs of other people, descriptions of other lands, stories about plants and animals that tell the truth, either in the form of fact or fiction. (Inspector-General *Gazette* 1903, p.102)

Second, there were books of ‘biography:’

[These] are valuable in part for knowledge and in part for inspiration, or for power to will and to do the great and noble thing. (Inspector-General *Gazette* 1903, p.102)

Third, there were books of ‘literature:’

[These] awaken ideals of heroism, of love, of beauty, of self-sacrifice, of returning good for evil, of honour, of honesty, of truthfulness and many other noble virtues. These are sometimes called the literature of power.” (Inspector-General *Gazette*, 1903, pp.102-103)

The use of books for such purposes related to the way in which the bible was used as a text of inspiration and for uplifting of the soul. The education department was born in a period of a bruising battles in South Australia about the use of the bible as reading materials in schools – a battle in which the secularists were successful. However, in this period, the first item in the course of instruction – a brief note that preceded the description of the ‘secular instruction’ – referred to bible reading and the fact that a teacher could read portions of the scriptures to pupils in the half hour before the official beginning of the school day at 9.30am. With the bible barred from use in the official curriculum, literature and poetry could be seen to carry the task of moralising students. As I have argued, however, this did not prevent it being put to use in the training of a particularly *English* moral subject.

This focus on the use of appropriate literature could also be seen as a response to the greater availability, through the expansion of cheap printing and publications methods in the Victorian era, of popular texts which appealed to an altogether different class than that of the director and inspectors.

I have a strong conviction that the “penny dreadfuls’ and some of even the higher-priced periodicals (containing little else than sensational and impossible adventures) which are issues weekly or monthly from the press, can scarcely fail to create an appetite for exciting and highly-spiced reading to which literature of a higher, more useful, and, except to a diseased taste, intrinsically more interesting kind will appeal in vain. The boy or girl who between the ages of sixteen and twenty has gone through a course of this sensational rubbish, will be with difficulty brought back to a state of mind which can enjoy the beauty, pathos, and truthfulness of such writers as Scott, Thackeray, and Dickens. The result must be a waste of valuable time and a debauching of literary taste. (Taken from a section entitled “Gleanings – Reading” in which an extract from “Memories Grae and Gay,” by John Kerr is given, *Gazette* 1907, p.168)

The availability of cheaper printing processes was to have its own effects on school reading. There was a move at this time to expand the materials available for reading beyond the one or two official primer texts supplied and used for the examination – the use of ‘optional reading books’ referred to by the director above (through the establishment of school libraries funded by parents. As books became cheaper, and as publishers produced materials for this market, the education department began to supply such texts.

One effect of this was increased attention given to silent reading in the curriculum and practices of English as the greater variety and number of texts could not be handled through traditional practices of reading aloud. The question became, how could the teacher know what the students were making of their reading – if it was silent and private. What moral lessons were being taken if the child could not be monitored as the reading took place? In addition, the greater publication of books meant that distinctly Australian texts were developed and distributed, along with American materials. Thus the particular Englishness of the subject position described here would be overlain or disrupted by other cultural sensibilities with consequent concerns about the effects of such changes.

This review of the nature of the texts students were to read has emphasised that the student subject constituted in the English curriculum must read (write, talk, etc) *about* something and that the content of that reading is the locus of concern about the moral sensibilities, the (cultural) ways of seeing and the aspirations that are to be developed in the student subject.

This paper has reviewed two of the subject positions and associated practices made available for students through the English subjects in the curriculum of the early 1900s. The other subject positions outlined earlier in this paper are canvassed in the wider study from which this paper is taken. These subject positions arose out of practices and discourses which in some cases parallel and in others seem at odds with the two positions reviewed here. One position that paralleled the two already discussed here was that of children speaking in a way that eliminated the ‘Australian’ twang – a position that strongly relates to that *English* sensibility being sought in the reader of the thoughts of great men. Other positions offered more contradictory or at least less complementary ways of being in the classroom. For example, the *naturalness* of the performance of reading aloud could be contrasted to the attention to a correct bodily position in the writing lesson and the focus on strict repetition and drill in achieving a perfect hand.

Conclusions

This review of subject positions and associated practices that were made available in a curriculum now a century old provides some useful perspectives and points of purchase on contemporary curriculum issues –ways of putting this history to ‘work’. (Green, Cormack, & Reid, 2000)

First, the very strangeness of the kind of student subject being sought can be used to disrupt current conceptions of the adolescent and child in the curriculum. Studies such as this illustrate the ways in which curriculum materials and curriculum practices *do work on* the child and the teacher. Rather than being a reflection of, and a response to, the child, curriculum practices constitute the child and make available subject positions constructed out of cultural and social imperatives that are historically contingent. The constructedness of the child of the early 1900s as an oral reader embodying particular English ways of seeing the world is obvious to us with the benefit of the distance we have from that period. That child we worry about today and seek to train as a critically literate reader of television and web pages is, I argue, just as constructed out of historically contingent cultural and social discourses. However, being within those discourses makes this process much harder to notice or analyse. History offers a way of disrupting the taken for granted of present arrangements.

[T]he project of histories of the present can be understood as the making of histories that locate the present as a strange, rather than familiar landscape, where that which has gone without saying becomes problematic. (Tyler & Johnson, 1991, p.2)

Second, tracing the descent of problematisations such as the linking of literacy with the health of schooling and proper notions of adolescence, allows the continuities and discontinuities in that linkage to be identified. Not only does this allow a sense of how current ‘fabrications’ of English or the student subject came to be in place, it also demonstrates the contingency and fragility of those arrangements – a sense that things could easily be otherwise. Thus one of the discontinuities identified in this paper is the subject position of the reader as oral performer. Such a subject position for the older child reader now seems a strange or even quaint practice. We could ask what current subject positions made available in the curriculum for the literate older child may seem strange in another ten or twenty years – or with the benefit of a historical consciousness, strange today?

But there are continuities to be identified too. I would suggest that this (strange) oral reader can still be visualised or recalled by some teachers today⁶. I argue that this subject position contains elements of practice that may inhabit current literacy pedagogy such as ‘readers’ theatre’ or the ‘book talk’. We could well ask in what ways the present curriculum calls upon reading or other aspects of English as a ‘performance’ which embodies particular social, cultural and gendered ways of relating to the text, just as did oral reading in 1900? We could also ask where in the practices of reading today is the audience/ listener/ examiner absolutely crucial to the performance – necessary to make sense of it and without whom the performance would be reduced to an empty gesture? Certainly in the practices mentioned earlier in this paragraph, but also in a related sense in practices like basic skills testing where

⁶ It is interesting that a common response to talks I have given to teachers about my historical work is for some to approach me to recount their own experience as students with practices that today seem remote – the use of slates, playground drill, and reading aloud. The subject positions described in this paper may retain a certain familiarity for many teachers.

the child becomes knowable as an individual reader to an examiner. Perhaps this reading aloud child is better characterised as a (dis)continuous subject who can offer some insights into contemporary curriculum practices.

Identifying continuities may help educational theorists and practitioners to work with (and against) imperatives that strongly inform curriculum practices today. For example, the discussion above of the position of reading as accessing the storehouse of (certain cultural and moral) knowledge – a feature of the curriculum in the 1900s – has strong continuities with contemporary concerns about the content of web pages or advertisements that young people access, and with concerns in the 1950s and 1960s about comics and American television programs. This continuity highlights the way that literacy education “... is not a technical/scientific problem but a normative or cultural project.” (Luke & Freebody, 1997) It is a reminder that we still share with the curriculum writers of 1900 the problem of how to place the social, the cultural and the moral in the curriculum albeit in radically different contexts.

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