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English Syllabus interpretation:

The relationship between literary theories and teacher beliefs

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between the literary theories underpinning an English syllabus and teachers' personal epistemologies and pedagogical beliefs. The study discussed here used semi-structured interviews and an online survey to investigate 50 New South Wales teachers' views of the theoretical basis of a senior English syllabus that came into force in 2000, and represented a substantial change of emphasis for the subject. Participants described the extent of alignment between literary theories they saw as influencing the Syllabus and their preferred literary theories, and linked this to their epistemological beliefs and their teaching practices at senior secondary level. Where there was a mismatch between the perceived theoretical basis of the Syllabus and teachers' own preferred literary theories, this fuelled participants' perceptions that the Syllabus was unduly influenced by unstable and contradictory literary theories which were seen as undermining their existing conceptions of English as a school subject. The study's findings suggest the importance of considering teachers' beliefs in developing and implementing a new syllabus.

Introduction

Contemporary teachers work in a rapidly changing educational environment. Substantial changes in a written curriculum mean that teachers need to interpret and make sense of the new requirements and the changes of classroom practice these entail, as Hargreaves (2003) notes.

After considerable deliberation, the Australian Curriculum for senior schooling is being embarked upon, with each state curriculum authority currently developing a new Stage 6 Syllabus. In New South Wales, the consultation period on the draft documents for the senior English courses closed in October 2016. In this context of curriculum change for the subject, it is timely to ask some key questions to inform the processes of development and implementation. What has been learnt from previous experiences of planning and implementing new curriculum at senior secondary level? What has emerged from research on how teachers interpret and implement new curricula, especially those that may entail changes in teacher attitudes and practices?

While there are multiple paradigms for the relationship between teacher beliefs and their current educational practices, irrespective of the source of teacher perceptions about a new syllabus, these *perceptions* influence how they interpret and enact the syllabus. Where teachers perceive a syllabus innovation to conflict with their existing beliefs and practices, this has the potential to affect how it is implemented (Pajares, 1992; Ertmer, 2005).

Context of the study

This paper considers the case of a major curriculum innovation in Senior Secondary English that represented a change for teachers' practices as well as the theoretical basis for the subject

(Manuel & Brock, 2003). The paper is drawn from a doctoral study completed at Macquarie University (Ireland, 2014) that focused on teachers exercising professional judgement in interpreting the role of literary theories in a senior English syllabus which came into force in New South Wales in 2000. While the study considered senior English curriculum in one state, the findings are of broader interest at a time when English teachers in each Australian state and territory are considering how their jurisdictions will implement the new Australian Curriculum Senior Secondary English courses, and what sorts of changes this will entail in their classrooms.

In NSW schools, a syllabus is developed by the Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards authority. This frames for teachers the rationale and the specific content of their subject area, and the basis on which students' learning will be assessed. The teacher's role is to exercise professional judgement in interpreting, preparing and enacting the written syllabus (Ben-Peretz, 1990).

Each teacher's interpretation of curriculum is strongly influenced by their knowledge and beliefs, subject conceptions, and experience of teaching contexts, and these in turn shape what teachers plan and enact (Pajares, 1992; Remillard & Heck, 2010). Marzano (2003) identifies the potential for friction and dissonance between a written curriculum and the ways teachers perceive their planning (the intended curriculum) and their responses to students' needs and interests (the enacted curriculum). As Pajares (2002) points out there is the potential for particular aspects of curriculum to lack congruence with teachers' pedagogical and epistemological beliefs, which can lead to curriculum contestation. If the dissonance between curriculum and teacher beliefs is difficult to resolve, the resulting contestation may be ongoing and disruptive.

Contestation

Contestation is defined here as long-lasting debate and conflict which resists resolution due to divergent assumptions. There are multiple sites of contestation and controversy that can arise for teachers in their processes of interpreting a written curriculum. The curriculum as a whole can be considered a site of contestation in terms of questions about the nature and role of teaching (Hargreaves, 2003; Ball, 1982; Kennedy, 2005). English as a subject has been a site of contestation over many years with various debates about its main purposes and distinctive qualities.

(Goodwyn, 2003; Marshall, 2000). Literary theories also constitute a contested field, and there are conflicting views about the merits of using various literary theories in the teaching of English (Bonnycastle, 2002; Cuddon, 1998; Leitch et al., 2001). Further, a specific syllabus may itself be a source of contestation as was the case in this study. When significant curriculum change is introduced, it entails both contestation and negotiation for participants who hold different underlying educational assumptions, beliefs and values (Luke, 2011; Kennedy, 2005).

The search for congruence

Teachers focus considerable effort on their search for congruence between written, intended, enacted, experienced and assessed curricula because this is important for both student achievement and for teacher professional satisfaction (Madda, Halverson & Gomez, 2007). Educators also seek congruence between mandated curricula and their existing beliefs and practices. The influence of literary theories in mandated curriculum provides an interesting case, as these theories have links to specific beliefs about English as a school subject, as well as to particular beliefs about how the subject should be taught (Marshall, 2000).

Beliefs have been defined by Schoenfeld (1998, p. 19) as 'mental constructs that represent the codification of people's experience and understandings' into propositions that motivate their behaviour. As units of cognition, beliefs combine to form knowledge, including hypotheses and faith claims, as well as opinions and statements based on empirical evidence (Leder, Pehkonen & Törner, 2002). Teachers' beliefs are said to influence 'almost everything one thinks about the business of teaching, the place of the school in society, most desired methods of teaching/learning and, finally, who should control curriculum and how it should be constructed' (Smith & Lovat, 1990, p. 71). Because beliefs are so pervasively influential, it follows that any curriculum innovation teachers see as challenging will be examined thoroughly for its congruence with their existing teacher beliefs. In the case of an English syllabus, these beliefs may centre on notions of English literature and how it can be studied, as well as pedagogical ideas about the ways the subject should be taught.

Contestation around a new English Syllabus

In 2000, a new and very different English Stage 6 Syllabus (Board of Studies, 1999) came into operation

in New South Wales. It was very different from its long-established predecessor and provided new courses of study for an increasingly diverse cohort of Higher School Certificate students. It reflected changes in thinking about the nature of English and literary theory and the developments in Cultural Studies that had occurred since the previous syllabus was written. There was considerable contestation surrounding the introduction of this Syllabus, centring on contrasting perceptions about the literary-theoretical bases of the Syllabus, and how these might align with or challenge existing teacher beliefs and practices. The contestation over this Syllabus occurred in both the educational sector and the wider community:

Public debate and opposing views about the substance and direction of the new courses reflected an equally robust debate within the ranks of the English teaching profession itself. (Manuel & Brock, 2003, p. 23)

A key issue in this debate was the perception that the Syllabus was shaped by diverse literary theories, in ways that constituted a significant shift in the foundations of English as a school subject (McGraw, 2005). Prior to the introduction of this senior Syllabus in 2000, English teachers in NSW had been working for a long period from a stable syllabus in the tradition of F.R. Leavis (Rosser, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2005). The Syllabus which commenced in 2000 was very different in that it was perceived to be taking account of recent developments in cultural studies and literary theory, which could have major implications for classroom practices in English (Hardage, 1999; Manuel & Brock, 2003; McGraw, 2005).

While literary theories are notoriously hard to define (Eagleton, 2003; Graff, 1979), they are essentially speculative accounts of how literature and other cultural artefacts can or should be encountered and interpreted. Examples of literary theories include formalism, Marxist literary theory, New Criticism, Leavisian criticism, reader-response theory, feminist literary theory, queer theory, and poststructuralism. Diverse literary theories essentially offer rival epistemological hypotheses about knowledge, meaning, the idea of veracity, the authority and even the existence of textual evidence (Cunningham, 2003; Eagleton, 2003).

The epistemological principles and assumptions on which literary theories rest are strikingly diverse. When they are embedded in a syllabus, these literary-theoretical principles and assumptions may not always be congruent with a teacher's existing epistemological

beliefs (their systems of belief about knowledge and knowing), which function as the lenses through which everything else is perceived (Pajares, 1992). In addition, many literary theories are logically incompatible with other theories, making it difficult to *combine* multiple theories into a single personal epistemology (Cole, Hill, Kelly & Rikowski, 1999). How an individual accounts for and understands these diverse literary-theoretical hypotheses can be expected to influence their attitudes and their practices (Hardage, 1999; Fish, 2001; Kitching, 2008).

In order to investigate the nature of English teachers' beliefs and their views about a new syllabus and its possible theoretical bases, the research question for this study was:

What is the relationship between teachers' perceptions of the literary theoretical basis of the NSW English Stage 6 Syllabus (1999) and their own beliefs and practices regarding literary theories?

Methodology

This research project explored how English teachers acted as syllabus interpreters within the context of contestation over literary theories that they perceived shaped the rationale for a new senior syllabus. Evidence was gathered from teachers' self-reports, in order to hear their voices on an issue which had been the focus of much discussion within the profession, in professional publications, and in the media (Manuel et al., 2009; McGraw, 2005; Freesmith, 2006).

The study was conducted in three phases, during which 50 NSW teachers of senior English provided their perceptions about the influence of literary theories in the English Stage 6 Syllabus ('the Syllabus') and the place of these in their classroom teaching.

Phase 1 of the study (2006) took the form of semi-structured interviews with five teachers in independent schools in one locality in order to test proposed lines of inquiry. From a Glossary of 19 theories produced by the principal researcher, the research participants were asked to select those theories they perceived as underpinning the Syllabus, and to specify which literary theories they personally held. They were also asked to evaluate the influence of any specific literary theories on their classroom practice in Year 12. Phase 1 participant feedback led to the interview questions being streamlined into an on-line survey.

The Phase 2 on-line survey (2007–2008) was completed by 25 English teachers drawn from across all NSW secondary school systems. The on-line survey

participants produced reflective responses about their attitudes and teaching practices concerning literary theories. The Glossary of literary theories provided for the Phase 2 survey participants had been amplified to include specific examples of classroom practices linked with each of the nineteen literary theories presented. Participants were able to add any other literary theories they saw as being influential upon the new Syllabus or their own practice.

Phase 3 of data collection (2010) comprised in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers about their views on and their approaches to teaching literary theories in senior English. The teachers described their perceptions of the influence of literary theories on the Syllabus, the types of applications of these that they believed were expected, assumed or required, and the degree to which they believed explicit teaching of literary theories was necessary or productive for their students. To help the teachers move beyond generalisations and to gain deeper insights into the investigation, Phase 3 participants were asked to give examples of recent lessons that demonstrated their approach to literary theories in senior English classes. Respondents were also asked to look beneath both the Syllabus and their own conceptions of English as a subject, to explore which literary theories (if any) they perceived as being influential in shaping the new Syllabus documents, and to relate these to their own beliefs and views of the purposes of English as a subject.

Considering the sample of participants from all three Phases of the study (N=50), almost a third of the teachers began teaching Year 12 English in the each of 1980s, the 1990s, and the first decade of the new millennium, with the remaining three having commenced before 1980. Seventy percent of the teachers had also taught the previous syllabus. The average term of tertiary education of the participants was 4.48 years. Fifty-two percent of participants were Heads of Faculty.

The analysis and underlying assumptions of this study drew on what Doyle (1993) has called teachers' *curriculum processes*, those processes through which teachers interpret, enact and evaluate curriculum in all its dimensions. From this perspective, teachers are seen as interpreting the 'meanings and intents' of curriculum documents (Remillard & Bryans, 2004, p. 6), rather than taking them as self-evident instructions to be obeyed. A curriculum processes framework recognises that there are links between teachers' curriculum actions and internal factors such as beliefs, values,

emotions, interests and motivation. It also assumes that teachers' actions and attitudes are influenced by external contextual factors emanating from the school and from the wider community. A logical corollary of a curriculum processes framework is that diversity of curriculum practice is seen as both inevitable and valuable (Brady & Kennedy, 2010).

This study's interpretivist paradigm is compatible with a critical realist epistemology in that interpretations of reality are not taken for granted, but are understood to reflect the theoretical assumptions of both the participants and the researcher (Robson, 2002). An interpretivist paradigm assumes there will be no single meaning attached to a complex phenomenon such as curriculum change (O'Donoghue, 2007). The meanings assigned to the role of literary theories in a new English syllabus could be expected to vary because of individual differences in teachers' perspectives, experiences and contexts. Consequently, rather than having a pre-structured research design with variables specified early, this study used general guiding questions to explore the field and allow patterns in the data to emerge gradually.

Themes identified from the data were displayed as matrices, charts and diagrams, to compress and display patterns, and to help investigate clusters, contrasts, and interacting networks of data for their explanatory power. Preliminary conclusions were tentatively drawn and verified by reducing data further to forms that facilitated analysis at a higher conceptual level. Every attempt was made to be open to unexpected patterns and themes, rather than seeking confirmation of any predetermined hypothesis. In each successive phase of the study, participant responses and evaluations opened up further lines of enquiry.

Findings

The participating teachers' reports of the difficulties they experienced in trying to reconcile diverse literary theories revealed epistemological beliefs that were connected with the particular literary theories they held themselves. According to the 50 Year 12 English teachers participating in this study, the diverse literary theories they saw as underpinning the 1999 NSW English Stage 6 Syllabus ('the Syllabus') were aligned to differing degrees with the literary theories the teachers held themselves. It was also apparent that the teachers' own epistemological beliefs were significant in many of the issues they had with the literary theories they perceived to underpin the Syllabus.

One factor that made it hard to resolve the controversy about the role of literary theories in the new English Syllabus was that the document itself did not explicitly or unambiguously state its theoretical foundations. This left teachers

to interpret and assimilate what is essentially an eclectic amalgam of elements of poststructuralism, new historicism, feminism, cultural heritage and personal growth perspectives. (Manuel & Brock, 2003, p. 25)

Research by O'Sullivan (2005) and by McGraw (2010) found teachers reported ongoing difficulties with interpreting and assimilating the theoretical bases of the Syllabus. The participating teachers in the present study had trouble finding congruence between what they perceived to be an incongruent mix of theories shaping the Syllabus and the literary theory or theories they found workable themselves. They were also faced with the not-inconsiderable task of increasing their understanding of these multiple theories and the ideological assumptions behind them. Disparities emerged between teachers with regard to knowledge of literary theories and familiarity with teaching them.

Relationship between literary theories and epistemological beliefs

All but one of the research survey participants stated that they believed that a diversity of literary theories shaped the underlying bases of the English Stage 6 Syllabus. In contrast, when asked to name any literary theories they held themselves, more teachers (32%, being 8 of 25) claimed to identify with *no literary theories* than with *any* of the 19 listed literary theories.

Marxist critical theory, feminist literary theory, reader response theory and Christian literary theory were the theories nominated most frequently as the literary theories the survey respondents held themselves (five of the 25); however, even the theories *most commonly nominated* as personally held were mentioned by only 20% of the teachers. This leaves more than three-quarters not holding these particular literary theories, reinforcing the sense of teachers' personal epistemologies being very diverse.

Sixteen percent of research survey participants (4 of 25) indicated that they held to one of the following theoretical stances: Leavisian/Practical criticism, post-colonial theory, and postmodernist/poststructuralist theory. None of the other theories teachers claimed to 'hold themselves' were selected by more than 8% of participants.

Eighty-four per cent of the participating teachers identified a lack of alignment between what they perceived the Syllabus to expect from them with regard to teaching literary theories, on the one hand, and their own stances towards literary theories on the other. These teachers reported disparities between the diverse perspectives on texts, meaning and interpretation they saw as being implicit in the Syllabus, and their own beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing in literary studies. To give an example, one teacher remarked,

I struggle with the idea of teaching literary theories. While I find the theories interesting I am often at odds with them (especially postmodernism) and feel that they disrupt students' experience of literature. (Rural independent school teacher)

Pedagogical reservations about the negative impact on students of some literary theories appear to make teaching such theories a 'struggle' for this teacher.

Another teacher tabled both epistemological and literary reservations which may be seen to arise from the same philosophical roots:

Postmodernism and poststructuralism ... are often in opposition to my own worldview. I also struggle with the faddish structural techniques associated with these theories. (Rural independent school teacher)

Where research participants distinguished between their own epistemological positions and the theories they considered teaching to their students, they typically provided a rationale for how their epistemological and pedagogical beliefs interacted to affect their practice:

Personally I read texts through a Humanist lens. Professionally, I have VERY strong beliefs in NOT espousing one particular 'ism'. That's so narrow and self-defeating. I want to inject my students with my passion for literature. That's what will sustain them in life, not some mindless adherence to a philosophical literary theory. (Metropolitan independent school teacher)

This teacher's response sets up a conflict between two philosophies of teaching English: one that emphasises a love of literature and another that interrogates texts through a literary-theoretical lens. The teacher indicates where her own commitments lie, and she reinforces her preference with positively loaded words.

An experienced teacher made the following statement of her personal epistemology: 'Postmodernism is a problem. "Perspective" is all very well except when reality strikes you in a WW II bunker! I prefer realism.'

This teacher appears to argue that theories such as postmodernism are artificial constructs which do not stand up to the test of real life, particularly in times of crisis. She links this to her view of literary theory in the Syllabus: 'The senior English course with its texts and theories just doesn't seem to gel ... literary theory can take on a life of its own and the students need it like a hole in the head' (Regional government school teacher). This teacher seems to imply that the juxtaposition of texts and theories leads to an awkward co-existence rather than complementarity, and implies the teaching of English is valued for its links to 'real life'.

Teachers experiencing epistemological dissonance with the Syllabus perceived that their students appeared to have similar conflicts. This presented professional dilemmas for them about whether it was advisable to teach students to critique literary theories. One rural teacher described the situation in this way:

Kids rail against what they see as nonsense. But for exam purposes they have to do postmodernism. I try to take on board students who disagree with the Syllabus on literary theory, but as a teacher you face a disturbing paradox that you have to do it this way for the exam even if you vehemently disagree with the theory in it. (Rural teacher)

At the time of this interview (2006), this respondent felt that teachers had to teach students to apply postmodernist theory in a certain way for the high-stakes external examination, even if neither the teachers nor the students endorsed that particular theoretical position. She indicated that teaching literary theories one saw as 'nonsense' was 'seriously disturbing for an educator', and stated that this contributed to her leaving the teaching profession.

Theoretical eclecticism in the Syllabus

Contrasting perceptions about the actual theoretical foundations of this Syllabus may be seen as a reflection of its eclectic incorporation of approaches drawn from divergent literary theories, or as an indication of a lack of theoretical clarity informing the Syllabus, or both. Five of the 25 teachers completing the Phase 2 survey indicated their belief that *all of the listed theories* underpinned the Syllabus, while one indicated that *no literary theories* underpinned it at all. The remaining 19 teachers generally listed 3–8 theories, with a total of 17 different theories being highlighted as influential in the Syllabus. Such disparities in teacher perceptions suggest that teachers found identifying the exact

theoretical bases of the Syllabus to be very difficult. It may also suggest that some teachers had limited levels of understanding and knowledge of some of these literary theories, and this view supports the observation made by Manuel and Brock (2003) that

Many teachers in 2000 ... found themselves ill-equipped – practically, theoretically and philosophically – to implement English courses that demanded of them a radically different set of assumptions about the teacher, the student, the text, the act of reading, and the 'art' of responding to and, now, composing literature. (p. 23)

Both a lack of consensus about the actual theoretical bases and their own under-preparedness may have contributed to the difficulties teachers reported in determining what role literary theories needed to play in their Syllabus implementation in the classroom, particularly where they experienced a mismatch between any specific literary theories and their own epistemological beliefs.

Postmodernism

Over the three Phases of this research, of all the theories mentioned by the respondents, the postmodernist/poststructuralist cluster was most often perceived as underpinning the Syllabus (72%). However, this was also the dominant cluster in conflict with the literary theories that the teachers held themselves (69% of participants). Of the 19 theories identified in the Glossary, the teachers' epistemological objections to the perceived influence of a literary theory in the Syllabus were overwhelmingly related to postmodernism or poststructuralism.

The presence of an elective called Postmodernism in the English Extension One Course may have led participants to focus on this literary cluster. In addition, poststructuralism/postmodernism cannot easily be added to other theories, because it claims to dissolve or debunk previous theories rather than to refine or enhance them (Eagleton, 2003; Bonnycastle, 2002; Henderson & Brown, 1997). If teachers already gave some credence to the Syllabus reflecting a collection of literary theories, then learning more about poststructuralism/postmodernism could present a professional dilemma: one could carry on holding an eclectic theoretical mix, or one could abandon the existing set of theories in order to adopt a position in line with poststructuralist/postmodernist theory.

It should be noted that teachers were officially advised in 2011 that the Postmodernism elective was

being discontinued. While this may be part of the natural cycle of curriculum content renewal, it could reflect recognition of the difficulties experienced by teachers in teaching rather iconoclastic theories to students who are facing high-stakes examinations.

Distinctive characteristics leading to postmodernism being the theory singled out for criticism may include its claims about the collapse of meaning (Graff, 1979), its rejection of the notions of truth and authority (Perkins, 1992), its reliance on 'self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement' (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 1), and its rejection of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984). One teacher, in admitting that she largely avoided such radical challenges to notions of meaning, offered a pedagogical rationale, which she saw as based on her personal epistemology: 'I do feel that if we take cultural assumptions for granted it is in deference to our students' age and a desire not to totally undermine their sense of stable values by which to live and make meaning' (City independent school teacher). Her statement recognises this teacher's sense of having a professional duty of care to adapt her classroom content to the students' levels of maturity so that students are able to deal with challenges to their existing worldviews.

One city teacher offered this rationale for *not* personally holding a postmodernist/ poststructuralist position: 'Poststructuralism is an economy that eats itself—it is ultimately self-destructing, an animal that eats its young' (City independent school teacher). This teacher appears to be suggesting that poststructuralism does not support educational purposes. A Head of Faculty described his epistemological objections to postmodernism: 'the idea that there is no truth is self-defeating: it defeats the truth it is supposed to be conveying' (Rural independent school teacher). This teacher had engaged in sustained study of literary theories, had amassed a substantial personal library on the subject, and had taught the Postmodernism elective before deciding that this inherent self-contradiction in logic made it unproductive to teach this content to his secondary English students.

Reliance on secondary sources on literary theories

Teachers involved in this research described how they increased their professional knowledge about literary theories and how they investigated the degree of alignment between these theories and their own beliefs. They noted that the primary sources of twentieth century literary theory were generally written

in languages other than English, and in complex and somewhat abstruse language, making it more difficult to comprehend and to examine the implications of these theories for their professional practice.

Only two respondents out of 50 said they had read the original literary theorists (albeit in translation). The remainder relied on secondary sources, glossaries and dictionaries of literary-theoretical terms, so as to glean enough information to understand the essentials of the theoretical concepts and strategies involved.

Participating teachers criticised the English Syllabus and the Support Documents (Board of Studies, 1999) for their vagueness and ambiguity concerning the actual role or any requirement of the teaching of literary theories. It was ironic that literary theories about the elusiveness of meaning were exemplified in the language of the Syllabus suggesting or hinting at their strategic importance, with their existence implied but not stating explicitly what teachers and students were expected to know about and to *do* with these theories. The Board of Studies, in recognition of the resultant confusion, published a Support Document in September 2007 that stated explicitly that students were *not* required to cover or explore diverse literary theories in any compulsory parts of the senior English Courses. Notwithstanding this statement, the teachers surveyed and interviewed after this publication continued to articulate their uncertainty about the role literary theories were meant to play in their teaching.

The research participants saw the Syllabus as representing and implying so many different literary theories and varied conceptions of the subject that it lacked coherence. They spoke of the English Syllabus being 'confused about its own expectations' and 'divided against itself'. This produced frustration for them when working to interpret it and to enact it in classroom learning activities. These findings show that teachers' uncertainty about the actual theoretical basis or 'slant' of the Syllabus arose from the document's own linguistic imprecision and vagueness, and also from its inclusion of principles from many literary theories without due recognition of their epistemological roots or of the irresolvable conflicts that exist between them. As Hargreaves (1996) has observed in a study on the culture of teachers' work, in a similar way the English teachers in this study ultimately came to question their capabilities to deal with this significant curriculum innovation on top of their other professional responsibilities.

Conclusion

The findings of this research show that these teachers experienced ongoing uncertainty about whether and how they should teach students to apply literary theories to texts, and that they questioned their ability to teach the theories effectively. In the case of NSW senior English, teachers saw themselves as poorly prepared 'practically, theoretically, and philosophically' (Manuel & Brock, 2003, p. 23) to teach literary theories, and this led them to experience uncertainty about their ability to interpret and to enact the challenges of a new Syllabus. When markers confirmed that literary theories were being used ineffectively by students (NSW Board of Studies, 2007b), this reinforced both teachers' reservations about the innovation's appropriateness and their sense that they were ill-equipped to teach it.

From the evidence gathered in this study, recent literary theories challenged teachers' conceptions of subject English, which compounded their concerns about their cognitive complexity and the associated workload stresses produced. In particular, the potential for recent literary theories to destabilise notions of determinable meaning made it hard for English teachers to weigh up the claims and counter-claims of various theories in order to teach them clearly to students. This produced a situation where not even the standards for testing the credibility of claims could be agreed on.

This case has implications for other syllabus innovations that rest on irresolvable contestation among epistemological beliefs. Feedback from teachers on the feasibility of including diverse ideological assumptions in a syllabus may be vital in determining whether and how contested curriculum innovations will enhance learning in practice. Not listening to teachers' evaluations of the risks and benefits of an innovation makes it more likely that an innovation will be short-lived or ineffectual due to superficial or confused adoption. The money, time and emotional effort involved in implementing curriculum change, and the extraordinary diversity of possibilities for change, make it very important to avoid ill-advised, confusing or abortive curriculum initiatives (Kennedy, 2005).

Teaching is a stressful and demanding occupation, and teachers invest considerable emotional energy in developing their professional identities as educators. Marshall (2000) and O'Sullivan (2008) argue that teachers of English make strong connections between their personal identities and their professional identities as English teachers. The findings of this research

strongly suggest that these connections also rest on being able to maintain congruence between teachers' own epistemological beliefs and their pedagogical practices.

English teachers characterise their subject as having an orienting function for students' unfolding sense of themselves, and this heightens their sense of the subject's significance. This would go some way to explaining teachers' perceptions that a Syllabus influenced by unstable and contradictory literary theories could pose a threat to personal epistemology and a sense of self for both teachers and students.

The findings of this study are important in that they illuminate the experience of teachers who perceive a new syllabus to be de-stabilising for their existing beliefs and practices in ways that are not helpful for students or for the profession. Lessons can be learned here about the importance of, and the need for, shared understanding and ongoing professional engagement in decision-making processes.

Teachers' epistemological and pedagogical beliefs shape their syllabus interpretation. These beliefs should be seen as a valuable source of insight, having been tested through professional practice, rather than as something which can be disregarded or marginalised by curriculum developers as they attempt to produce a radically altered mandated curriculum while bringing about significant change that may challenge those existing beliefs. It follows that the inherent relationship between the epistemological bases of curriculum change proposals and teachers' epistemological beliefs should be a critical consideration in the development of any new curriculum.

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