

English in Australia: Complying or disappearing?

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ABSTRACT: Australia may be about to enter an era of compliance in educational provision to match the current regime in England. English is subject here to the same pressures on testing, outcomes and literacy concerns as in England. It is possible, but is appearing increasingly unlikely, that our federal system may prevent the kind of all encompassing accountability and Big Brother-ness that is educational life in England. Similarly the Institutes of Teachers growing up in Australia may be a force for good for the profession or may become just another form of managerialism with which governments can beat teachers and withdraw from their own responsibilities in education. The biggest threat to the subject in Australia at present may, in fact, be the trend towards inter-disciplinary curricula that ignore the potential and depth of critique and creativity provided by subject English.

KEYWORDS: English, curriculum, literacy, assessment, professional standards.

At the closing plenary of the 2004 joint national conference of English teacher associations in Australia¹, Andrew Goodwyn suggested that Australia had yet to see the worst of compliance – that we had yet to go through the kind of measures that England has had to endure, but that the horror was on its way (see Goodwyn, 2001).

In many ways, the scenarios that England² has lived through in the 90s do already have embryonic form in Australia; others are already mature but manifest themselves differently and yet others take on forms that present quite different threats and issues. Given the way that Western bureaucracies in a globalised environment – each drawn to that holy grail of voodoo economics, the balanced budget – have an amazing ability to simply reproduce the worst of each others' cultures in place of real policy initiative, Goodwyn's warnings do need to be taken seriously in Australia.

TEACHER EDUCATION AND TEACHING STANDARDS

In England, teacher education is today dominated by a compliance juggernaut formed from a mix of policies issuing out of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED) – policies that lay down a large part of the curriculum of teacher education faculties (or, in the true spirit of economic rationalism, “ITT [Initial Teacher Training] providers”) and ensure compliance through the mechanism of the OFSTED inspection. Teachers who wish to be employed by state schools (the policies do not apply to teachers in the private system)

¹ Namely, the joint conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE), the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) and the Primary English Teachers' Association (PETA), Sydney, July 2004.

² In the discussion which follows on the situation in England, it is worth noting that since devolution Wales has scrapped most tests and all league tables and that Scotland was always different on these issues.

after finishing their university (“ITT provider”) training, undergo a series of additional “Qualified Teacher Status” (QTS) tests in order to achieve registration with the General Teaching Council (GTC) (registration is not required of private school teachers). Not surprisingly, the curriculum forced onto the universities (“ITT providers”) is one that in its turn supports the National Curriculum. Given the “small government” ideological bent of Thatcher and her successors in knitting together this range of procedures, the irony of its Stalinist tendency ought not to be lost.

What’s happening in Australia? Firstly, it is important to understand that school education policy in Australia is almost entirely a concern of individual state governments. Individual states run public education systems, employ teachers in those systems, write their own curriculum for all schools (public and private) in the state and, in various ways, have their own mechanisms for the inspection and registration of private and church schools. The Commonwealth/Federal/ National government does not directly administer schooling in any way, though – importantly – it does provide direct funding to support schools and school systems. On the other hand, university policy and university funding is a Commonwealth area. This puts the matter of initial teacher education out of the realm of those who control school education. Thus, the idea of knitting together a complex of policies that will drive practice from initial teacher education right through to classroom curriculum is going to be more complex in Australia.

Nevertheless, certain tendencies are beginning to emerge. Almost every state has now developed an Institute of Teachers to oversee the profession in its own state. These are the equivalents of England’s GTC. The role and operating mechanisms of the Institutes vary widely from state to state. My own state of New South Wales (NSW) has only recently formally introduced its Institute. It is the most recent, the longest in gestation, and appears to be the one with, so far, potentially the greatest effective reach into the profession. The Institute has produced sets of standards for the profession that will operate at “Graduate teacher”, “Professional Competence”, “Professional Accomplishment” and “Professional Leadership” levels. The first two of these will be compulsory for registration, and the latter two will be voluntary. The relationship between, for example, “Professional Leadership” within the Institute and actual administrative roles within schools is a matter for the different schooling systems (state, church, independent) to decide. Unlike England’s GTC, registration at the first two levels will be compulsory for all teachers, including those in private schools. The Institute is set up as a statutory body, operating at arm’s length from government and representing the profession itself.

For teacher education faculties in NSW universities, this new arrangement raises the question of the degree to which their curriculum must conform to meeting graduate standards for the Institute. University programs will now be accredited as appropriate for graduate teacher registration or not. To some extent, this has been the case for many years, during which time the university teacher education programs have prepared graduates to teach the school syllabuses operating within their states and, in NSW, have also accepted a responsibility to teach other aspects of curriculum arising from the demands of the major employer, the NSW Dept of Education and Training (NSWDET). Compliance with the employer demands has led to the university’s program being accredited by the NSWDET Teacher Qualifications Advisory Panel (TQAP).

However, lately, there have been signs that what is effectively goodwill is being stretched as the NSWDET puts into place increasing demands about mandatory requirements in cross-curricular literacy, programs for indigenous students, programs in special education, classroom management programs, ESL and ICT programs. While each of these is undoubtedly important (and, in practice, are already covered to varying degrees in different teacher education courses) the degree of coverage and amount of content demanded by the DET will mean further overcrowding an already crowded teacher education curriculum – especially in the graduate entry programs (equivalent to England’s Post Graduate Certificate in Education [PGCE]), which in NSW are still largely one-year programs.

There is resistance to these NSWDET demands arising from a belief that if the employer wants these things covered in the amount of depth outlined, then the employer ought to provide them itself, and some resentment that the employer appears to continue to hold an attitude to teacher education that is a hangover from the days when Teachers’ Colleges were organs of the NSWDET or its equivalents – a situation which has not been the case since all initial teacher education became located in universities. This relationship between employer demands and teacher education curricula will become further complicated by the Institute, which has its own set of graduate standards and its own mandatory requirements (also covering cross-curricular literacy, programs for indigenous students, programs in special education, behaviour programs, ESL and ICT programs).

Obviously no teacher education institution would jeopardise its students’ chances of registration or employment by deliberately avoiding mandatory requirements – hence the good will that operates now with the NSWDET. However, as stated, university programs will now be accredited as appropriate for graduate teacher registration or not, and compliance becomes that much tighter. Complicating this will be the additional factor that employers (in effect, the NSWDET) will continue to want to accredit programs as well. University Education faculties will now have twice the compliance administration. Again, compliance becomes another degree tighter.

Complicating this even further is the very recent development of a national institute for teachers over and above the state Institutes: the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL). The aim of this Institute is, like its state counterparts, to raise the status, quality and professionalism of teachers and school leaders throughout Australia. This is laudable, of course, but immediate responses have questioned what such an Institute can do that its state counterparts cannot do and what its real powers can be since there are no direct powers that the Commonwealth has over schooling as such. The Institute is to have four main functions:

- Professional standards development
- Professional learning for school leaders and classroom teachers
- Research and communication
- Promotion of the profession.

The research and promotion function will be welcomed by the profession. However, one wonders what the relationship of national professional standards vis-à-vis state equivalents will be. Will it be a question of portability between states? Will state systems therefore recognise national standards? Will either state or national standards disappear as they appear to duplicate one another? Will national standards only be taken up in states currently without detailed Institute standards?

The worrying feature in terms of managerial approaches to standards is the “professional learning” aspect. Under this aim, NIQTSL is to have “a role in quality assuring university teaching courses”. Given that the Commonwealth *does* have direct power over the universities, the degree to which “quality assurance” equates with determining the curriculum of teacher education is a genuine concern. In the last eight years, this government has sought to withdraw as quickly as possible from supporting universities and a higher education culture in this country at the same time as compliance and administration costs supporting that compliance have increased. The radically Right-wing Liberal government currently in power now provides more money for private schooling in Australia than it does for universities, yet universities are more directly in its jurisdiction. It will be interesting to watch the degree to which this dualism (less support, greater demands) operates through NIQTSL. Of course, all of this is subject to the degree to which the national Institute operates or not as an organ of government. One of the more welcome aspects of NIQTSL is the representation of professional associations who make up 5 of 14 voting members of the Board.

Inevitably, one’s trepidation about Institutes and standards is embedded in a whole debate over managerialism. Are standards about rewarding and promoting the profession or are they further instruments of compliance? One aspect of the issue is the degree to which Institutes can genuinely operate independently of the state – including the state as employer. If they do not, then the idea of the Institutes as bodies promoting the profession is undermined by the potential for distrust.

In Australia, the profession itself developed standards in advance of the creation of many of the institutes through three major research projects based in the professional associations for English, Maths and Science. In English, “Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia” (STELLA) has formed the basis for debates over the role that the profession through professional associations might take in the development of standards. While the STELLA project focuses on the “accomplished” English teacher – and is therefore equivalent only to the NSW Institute level of “professional accomplishment” – it is clear that STELLA played a role in the developing of the Institute standards, despite the currently generic nature of the latter. A series of tabular comparisons makes this point.

Despite the obvious notice that the NSW Institute has taken of the standards developed by the profession³, there remains much concern about the degree to which a set of standards developed in order to help drive the on-going growth of the profession and its individual members will simply become just another instrument of managerialism:

The “standards” which STELLA develops will inevitably present a certain account of English Literacy teaching to compete with other accounts. The standards will construct a view of the profession’s identity that contrasts with others’ views. The semiotic complexity of the term “standards” arises not only from the fact that it must embrace the diversity of English Literacy teaching around Australia, but because the views and values articulated will also be shaped by the views and values the standards are designed to resist (Doecke & Gill, 2000-2001, p. 7).

³ To a degree, this is also the case in Victoria. See Hayes, 2004, p. 4.

Table 1(a). STELLA/NSW Institute of Teachers: Professional knowledge

STELLA	NSW Institute of Teachers
<i>Professional knowledge</i>	<i>Teachers know their subject content and how to teach that content to their students</i> <i>Teachers know their students and how they learn</i>
1.1 Teachers know their students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of and respect for the diverse social, cultural ethnic and religious backgrounds of students, and the effects of these factors on learning • Knowledge of the physical, social and intellectual developmental characteristics of the age group(s) of students • Knowledge of students' varied approaches to learning • Knowledge of how students' skills, interests and learning histories affect learning • Knowledge of strategies for addressing the mandatory components
1.2 Teachers know their subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of subject content • Knowledge of NSW curriculum requirements
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of information and communication technologies (ICT) in ...mandatory areas
1.3 Teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of pedagogy

Table 1(b). STELLA/NSW Institute of Teachers: Professional practice

<i>Professional practice</i>	<i>Teachers plan, assess and report for effective learning</i> <i>Teachers communicate effectively with their students</i> <i>Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments through the use of classroom management skills</i>
2.1 Teachers plan for effective learning	Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching and learning goals • Teaching and learning programs • Selection and organisation of content • Selection, development and use of materials and resources
2.2 Teachers create and maintain a challenging learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective communication and classroom discussion • Teaching strategies • Student grouping • Create an environment of respect and rapport • Establish a climate where learning is valued and students' ideas are respected • Manage classroom activities smoothly and efficiently • Manage student behaviour and promote student responsibility for learning
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assure the safety of students
2.3 Teachers assess and review student learning and plan for future learning	Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking assessment to learning • Providing feedback to students • Monitoring of students' progress and record-keeping Reporting Program evaluation

Table 1(c). STELLA/NSW Institute of Teachers: Professional engagement

<i>Professional Engagement</i>	<i>Teachers continually improve their professional knowledge and practice</i> <i>Teachers are actively engaged members of their profession and the wider community</i>
3.1 Teachers demonstrate commitment	
3.2 Teachers continue to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to analyse and reflect on practice
3.3 Teachers are active members of the professional and wider community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement in personal and collegial professional development • Capacity to contribute to a professional community • Contributing to the school and the wider community
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating with parents and caregivers • Engaging parents and caregivers in the educative process • Professional ethics and conduct

STELLA provides an alternative to initiatives by systems to define teaching standards, especially managerial forms of accountability for assessing the performance of individual teachers....The dangers of allowing our professional culture to be shaped by standards are highlighted by...the way portfolios are currently used in pre-service programs in the United States to judge whether students are ready to join the teaching profession...both teacher educators and their students speak of the need to demonstrate performance “against” professional standards....Rather than addressing the unequal resourcing of schools, or the culturally loaded nature of outcomes-based curriculum and standardised testing, governments propose to raise educational standards by introducing measures to lift the quality of a teacher’s individual performance. After all, research supposedly shows that the key determinant in the success of students is the teacher (Doecke, Locke & Petrosky, 2004, pp. 104-109).

This set of concerns reflects the problematic nature of teaching conceived of as a “profession”. Teachers want and deserve the kind of independence that doctors have through colleges; they want and deserve the kind of self-regulation and maturity that is commensurate with their professional status. Ultimately, however, teachers are subject to the public purse and public regulation (including in private schools in Australia) and professionalism comes up against a kind of accountability that is not just subject to the profession or to law, as are doctors, but to employing bodies. The increasingly dominant idea that “the teacher is the answer” creates a related double-edged sword. If the teacher is the answer, teachers gain status as professionals. But, as Doecke, Locke and Petrosky (2004) point out above, this gives governments and systems a scapegoat that allows them to avoid raising their own standards of investment in systems.

LEAGUE TABLES

A stark example of governments avoiding their own role in educational outcomes is the league tables published in England to reflect school test results. In a 2004 website article entitled the “The best and worse schools”, the BBC News published the 2003 league tables for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) naming Dr Challoner’s (selective) Boys’ Grammar School in Buckinghamshire as the top school for the year and the Ramsgate school as “the worst state school” in the country (BBC News, 2004). Incredibly, these tables are not based on value-added measures, but on

absolute results in the national tests. (Value-addedness was, in fact, only available for the first time in 2003, but this article does not use the measure.) Even more incredibly, even though other schools achieved the benchmark of 100% of students scoring at the highest level of at least five GCSE subjects at grades A to C, Dr Challoner's Boys' Grammar School "beat" these others because it had more students sitting the test! At Ramsgate, only 4% of students achieved "at least five good grades".

What the article does not mention is that Amersham – where Dr Challoner's school is located – is in a county council district which boasts the highest average weekly income in the UK – seven times higher than in the most deprived areas of the country. Ironically, one of those most deprived areas is Ramsgate – located in the council district of Thanet which is one of the UK's most deprived districts, is Kent's most deprived council district, and is the 60th most deprived local authority district in England. The response of education authorities to these realities? Ramsgate school is on notice to "improve or face possible closure" while its head teacher (Principal) ran formal competency procedures against 24 of the school's 37 teachers.

Events of this kind are yet to occur in Australia. Nevertheless, the Liberal government desires league tables and has made many attempts to bring them in. Each Federal Liberal Education minister since 1996 has threatened to withhold funding subject to assessments and benchmarks (see, for example, Sawyer, 1997). Eventually, all state ministers agreed to a set of national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy at Years 3, 5 and 7. The benchmarks ostensibly establish nationally agreed minimum acceptable standards for literacy and numeracy for a particular year level, with the term "minimum acceptable standard" referring to the level of literacy and numeracy a student must have in order to make progress at school without undue difficulty. However, without direct control of schooling, the Liberals had to accept, not a series of national tests, but assessment standards set by individual states – that is, the assessment instruments are not national ones.

However, the current Minister – Brendan Nelson – is pushing the testing/league table agenda with a relish, peculiar even for this government. He intimated in 2003 that he might withhold the \$6.9 billion on offer to state and territory systems as "leverage" to gain compliance for national curriculum, testing and league tables. The curriculum debate is discussed below. However, throughout 2004, the specific position on league tables has hardened. In April, he announced that he would make the receipt of \$31 billion for schools over the next four years conditional upon state governments and school authorities publicly releasing school performance information for every school. The precise details of what information is to be made public is currently the subject of consultation, but the Minister expects it to include: average Year 12 results; percentage of students achieving the national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy; improvements on previous years; school leaver destinations; teacher qualifications and their involvement in professional development; staff and student retention and absentee rates. The degree – and nature – of information to be made public appears to out-Stalin even Thatcher. (In a bizarre twist on this agenda, Nelson appears obsessed with the notion of school, front-gate noticeboards as appropriate places for this public information.)

Of course, all of this sits within the Right-wing rhetoric of choice. In yet another idiosyncratic twist on the choice agenda, the Australian government recently made available to all parents, whose children do not reach the national literacy benchmarks,

a \$700 voucher to be used for private literacy tuition. It is this choice rhetoric that is behind the continued drive to privatise as much as possible of education. Such rhetoric allows governments to retreat from supporting public institutions, to pretend that choice (such as the choice of a private education) is equally available to all, and then to blame the poor for making the wrong choices by keeping their children within “under-performing” schools. In *Educating the “Right” way*, Michael Apple has documented how a specific set of ideas have become clustered in US education debates in such a way as to become inseparable. The ideas include the usual Right-wing cluster of “choice”; “markets”, “privatisation” and “competition” to provide choice and “testing” to determine choice. But Apple also documents the way Christian religious values have inextricably joined the cluster (Apple, 2001). In Australia, while religious schools are certainly on the rise as a result of the Liberals’ States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education) Act of 1996, a more general notion of “values” has hit the education agenda in an unprecedented way. Early in 2004, the Prime Minister, John Howard, master of wedge politics, tried a kite-flying exercise in which he argued that public education was value-free and (remarkably, at the same time) too “politically correct”. The exercise blew up in his face somewhat, but nevertheless, another condition later imposed on Federal funding has been that each school in Australia has a working flagpole!

On the other hand, it may be Howard has hit on – or created – a nerve in the Australian electorate. As I write this, the NSW broadsheet, *The Sydney Morning Herald* has begun a series on public and private schooling in Australia, the first article of which documents an Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) study showing that the flight from public education in this country (what Apple documents as “white flight”) is indeed an issue of “culture” – manifested in a desire for “better discipline...tradition, smart uniforms and moral values”. Surprisingly enough, the study also found a “direct link between socio-economic status and school choice” (Doherty, 2004)! With just a little tweaking, Michael Apple, it appears, could be writing his book about Australia today.

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Of course, delivery of national assessment in England reflects the National Curriculum. The National Curriculum is based on attainment targets, with national testing at each Key Stage. Once again, the National Curriculum is only compulsory in state schools, although most private schools do choose to follow it. Throughout the late 20th century there were various attempts to impose national curricula throughout Australia - it was another holy grail of Federal Education Ministers and the most recent attempt was a series of National Statements and Profiles developed in the mid-90s which, in NSW at least, have been relegated to forgotten history. Each attempt at a national curriculum in effect foundered on the states’ belief in the superiority of their own curriculum. Interestingly, the latest manifestation of the national curriculum originated from the state ministers’ own concerns at the lack of curriculum consistency among states and territories. After commissioning a project on curriculum provision in the Australian states and territories, the ministers endorsed recommendations for the development of Statements of Learning in the four curriculum domains of English, Maths, Science and Civics and Citizenship. Statements of Learning are meant to achieve not “a tight national curriculum as exists in England...but a move to greater national curriculum consistency” (Holt et al, 2004: 16). The project, entitled National Consistency in Curriculum Outcomes (NCOO)

aims to reach agreement about what are essential learnings in the four subject areas. These Statements of Learning are meant to encapsulate the “essentials” of the subjects, identify and build on common elements and outline a sequence of learning across Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. An early draft Statement in English was heavily criticised by the NSW English Teachers’ Association as reflecting only very reductive and functionalist aspects of the subject. NCOO was never intended by the state and territory ministers to become part of a national assessment and reporting framework, but given that Nelson is using funds as leverage for league tables and given that the states have accepted national benchmarking anyway, it does not take a great leap of imagination to see a time when the state and territory ministers might concede uniform national testing as simply cheaper than running their own individual state tests for benchmarking. It does not take a much further leap then into the next step where NCOO outcomes are the basis of such testing.

ENGLISH, LITERACY AND GENERIC SKILLS

Goodwyn has written extensively about current concerns among English teachers in England about the effects of the national rhetoric in respect of literacy (Goodwyn, 2001; Goodwyn, Brookes & Findlay, 2002; Goodwyn, 2003) through the National Literacy strategy (NLS). The secondary version of England’s primary Literacy Hour is the Framework for English in which secondary teachers are expected to use the format and much of the content of the Literacy Hour. The resulting frustration among British teachers is summed up well in a recent chapter of his entitled “We teach English not literacy”:

The NLS (and literacy as defined by the NLS) is actually very dull stuff, which does little to nurture children’s imaginations. It neglects the aesthetic experience of English.

It is lamentable that the term “English” and “Literature” are progressively (like a spreading fungus) being usurped by the term “Literacy” (Goodwyn, 2003, p. 125).

The NLS cuts across the National Curriculum and is, of course, part of the monitoring of “standards”.

In Australia, too, the national benchmarks previously referred to are literacy benchmarks – monitored by each state individually through its own assessment regime. In NSW, this is through the Basic Skills Tests at Years 3 and 5, the English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) in Years 7 and 8, and the School Certificate English/Literacy examination in Year 10. I have written about the ELLA and Basic Skills tests elsewhere (Sawyer, 1999a and 1999b), and do not wish to canvass the arguments in detail again.

Briefly, ELLA is especially notorious among English teachers for a highly reductive approach to writing – based entirely on a “genre” (in NSW, “text-type”) pedagogy. Broadly, this is the view which argues that generic structures ought to be directly taught and consciously chosen by writers and their writing conform to the particular genre’s structure. In this view of pedagogy, learning to write becomes primarily a matter of learning to control genres. Moreover, subject-based knowledge across the curriculum is constructed by, and in turn constructs, particular generic forms (“genres make meaning”). ELLA tests this kind of conformity to a generic formula, along with

aspects of spelling, punctuation and grammar, despite the rejection of the text-type definitions as the basis of “genre theory” by key linguists (Hasan, 1995; Richardson, 2004).

When ELLA was first introduced it included a particularly invidious marking scale for the writing test in which grammatical and punctuation items were marked on “0/1” scale, with any errors receiving “0”. Hence the test was unable to discriminate between the student who made a typographical error and the student who had real problems with the item. To some extent, this area of marking has been improved. However, the written test of “literacy” still revolves around students conforming to pre-determined generic or “text-type” structures.

Government “literacy strategies” almost always involve a fascination with the most reductive aspects of literacy, whatever research suggests. In England, the NLS is obsessed with phonics, as is the USA through “No Child Left Behind”. In NSW, it’s genre/text types. The effect of the test then is to force on teachers of writing a quite limited view of writing and a reductive view of “literacy”. The reading component of ELLA is straightforward, multiple-choice comprehension even though arguments questioning multiple-choice comprehension are well known (see, for example, Moy & Raleigh, 1984; Sawyer & Watson, 1997). The positive side of all this is that teachers outside of English have had to see themselves as teachers of literacy, since the text-types tested ostensibly reflect writing tasks across curriculum areas. However, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that it is still the English Head Teacher who is called to account if test results are poor. There are similar issues in Year 10, where the testing and marking reflect a similar culture.

Perhaps a more urgent issue for English teachers is an increasing trend among state governments to prioritise inter/trans-disciplinary generic skills as the basis of schooling outcomes. At the time of writing, Tasmania has developed an Essential Learnings Framework (Dept of Education, Tasmania, 2004), Victoria has embarked on curriculum reform through a Framework for Essential Learning (VCAA, 2004), while Queensland continues to trial the New Basics project in which fifty-nine schools throughout Queensland are embarked upon a three-year, trans-disciplinary curriculum program of “rich tasks” (Education Queensland, 2001). Inter-disciplinary curricula to develop “skills for the future” are becoming something of a trend in Australia and not all of these states (Victoria is one exception) continue to give the discrete discipline of English a central place in these curriculum projects.

The more cynical among us see the trend as a government reaction to teacher shortages in areas like English, Maths and Science – to be met by teachers, particularly in middle school situations, teaching inter-disciplinary curricula. Concerns about this are not just a conservative reaction by those with vested interests in preserving the discipline, since English continues to re-invent itself, as it always has done, to develop skills in crucial areas of the curriculum with which no one else deals. If one asks oneself what English essentially concerns itself with – and what it does that no other area of the curriculum deals with – a model something like the following emerges:

Study of language
Reflection on language
Critique of language

Creation of language
 IN TEXTS OF
Literature
The Media and Film
The Personal
 IN
Print
Electronic
Oral
 and
Visual
 FORMS

In terms of the *language* and *text* groupings of that table above, no other area of the curriculum sees those items as its central concern. In other words, English does far more than develop the technologies of the generic skills of reading, writing, listening, viewing and representing. It alone focuses on language for its own sake and on the language of particular sorts of texts as its central contribution to developing imaginative, creative and critical citizens.

Australians live in a land where a Federal government can simply write off some electoral promises as “non-core”, can bring in a regressive taxation system that would “never ever” be brought in, can lie about refugees throwing their children overboard – and still win elections. We cannot afford any sort of curriculum that does not include developing imaginative, creative and critical citizens through the study and practice of English. Perhaps even more urgent than all of the political issues around testing and compliance is a related battle to retain the central importance of the subject itself.

Ironically, this is happening in Australia at a time when the negative trend discussed in this article may be losing momentum in England itself. According to Goodwyn (2004), the very emphasis in England on whole school literacy may mean that English can gradually re-emerge as a more creative/imaginative subject. The Framework for English is entering its fourth year and there are signs that it is “loosening up” with subject departments becoming more confident in their own judgement. Teacher assessment has even been re-introduced at Key Stage 1 (i.e. for seven-year olds). In the early stages of implementation, the NLS and the Framework for English were accompanied by the production of “teacher proof” material and pedagogy. While certain teachers may have liked this, Goodwyn believes that there is evidence after three years that good teachers have had enough. It seems that the English consultants are beginning to recognise this and are deciding how to be more flexible.

SO, WHERE TO WITH COMPLIANCE?

For subject English, the experience of compliance in England has meant a re-alignment of the subject as testing for “literacy” becomes a dominant concern – a re-alignment which may be beginning to turn around. In Australia, a re-alignment is also occurring, partly as a result of literacy testing, but also partly as a result of drives towards new models of curriculum in middle schooling. These latter themselves are also partly pragmatic responses to teacher shortages in the key areas of English, Maths and Science. Nevertheless, as the current Right-wing Commonwealth government flexes its muscles more in the area of school education through budgetary constraint, there is evidence that compliance will become the dominating drive in re-

aligning our sense of what “English” is. Just as England found under Thatcher, those governments which so loudly espouse the virtues of the free market are the same governments which put in place the most heavy-handed managerialism in the public sector, while still overlaying that sector with the language of the market (the Commonwealth has recently re-labelled universities as Higher Education Providers or HEPs for administrative purposes).

Goodwyn is probably correct in asserting that Australia is yet to see the worst of compliance. The future degree of compliance in this country will depend on how Commonwealth/State relations play out. There is no doubt that the Commonwealth would like to control curriculum and testing, initial teacher education and the culture of the profession. Initial teacher education is potentially the easiest to control, since the universities are already a Commonwealth function in name, despite the government’s increasing moves towards forcing privatisation – a question of wanting to retain power without responsibility. However, the need for universities to prepare teachers to teach the local curriculum will provide an area of contestation here, which the Commonwealth may fight through budgetary threats. Control of the culture will be more difficult, since most teachers are overseen by state governments and all will presumably be overseen by state Institutes. If increasing funding of private schools by the Commonwealth was one way of lessening the control of the states over large sections of the schooling population, the state Institutes will probably act as some brake on that move, through at least overseeing the teaching populations of private schools.

The questions of curriculum and testing will be more complex. Budget controls and the wedge provided by NCOO may see greater Commonwealth control of these areas despite its previous lack of success. A Federal election in October may bring a change of government at the national level, of course, but, as England found, New Labour on education can be as appalling as Old Tory. Australian Labor would like to see itself as an “education government”. In the event of the election of a Labor government, there is some hope that some respect might be restored for the professionalism of education practitioners in this country.

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