

## Teaching Risk in HSC English: the view from the ground

by

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### Abstract

The NSW Board of Studies has initiated a process of syllabus reform in HSC English. In this context of reform teachers in a rural region of Central Western NSW are participating in a study to explore their perceptions and understandings of: English as an HSC subject; the professional and institutional contexts in which HSC English is taught; and their own professional development needs in relation to HSC English. In relation to the HSC English curriculum, the research is exploring teachers' immediate practical concerns regarding the specific content of HSC English courses from year to year, the examination process, and related issues. In addition, teachers' sense of involvement or lack of it in decisions about what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, and the institutional practices and policies which affect the quality of teaching of HSC English are being examined.

Finally, teachers' professional development needs in relation to the HSC English curriculum, in general, and also with regard to the current review process will also be examined. To what extent teachers see themselves as autonomous professional agents in the context of the classroom and their perceived relationship to hierarchies of control - the HSC system at large - is a crucial issue in the research. This paper describes briefly the setting up of the research project, the theoretical framework underpinning it, and attempts a tentative reading of the research to date.

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## Introduction

Following sustained professional and public concern about perceived inequities and inconsistencies inherent in the system of Higher School Certificate (HSC) English the Board of Studies in NSW has initiated a process of review of the structure and content of HSC English courses.

It has produced an HSC English review document, a sub-committee report recommending structural changes and including a consultation writing brief for those who are to rewrite the senior English syllabuses for NSW schools (Board of Studies 1995).

The sub-committee report indicates a need to bring English into line with conceptual and methodological developments in the subject, but provides no direction as to how this is to be done, nor does it discuss English teachers' present grasp of these developments. Topics like post-colonial criticism, feminist criticism, a functional approach to language, and critical literacy, to name a few, are specifically mentioned in the Board's review document. In the light of the curriculum directions stated in the document, teachers are expressing concerns about their own professional competency to implement the proposed curriculum in their classrooms.

In this paper we want to explore the way that the institution of the HSC might construct risk positions for teachers and how HSC English teachers' practices and beliefs - referred to here as their 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1994) - may actually unintentionally reinforce rather than mitigate teachers' feelings of professional risk. Also, we want to describe a research project that we are engaged in to further explore this area and finally, we will tentatively describe the results of our work in progress on this issue.

## Teaching Risk in HSC English

The 1994 HSC in English will perhaps be best remembered for the unfortunate focus it cast on one New South Wales High School, South Grafton High. Students at this school who performed very well in other subjects achieved very disappointing results in HSC English - in which they took the 'literary' 2 Unit Related course - their results leading to certain kinds of questions being asked in the Sydney press:<sup>1</sup> about the competence of the teachers involved, about the risk to HSC students of being exposed to 'bad teaching', about the implications of taking

English for students future access or lack of it to the higher education course of their choice; and, by way of response, to a round of incriminations. Parents considered legal action against the Board of Studies; students were advised in the print media to check the practices of their own teachers against the experiences of students in other classes or at other schools if possible; and students at another school were asked by their teachers to sign disclaimers if they took the (widely referred to as 'more difficult') 2 Unit Related course, disclaimers which exonerated the school of any responsibility for the students' performance in the HSC exam, should it be in any way disappointing.

Even though the adequacy of both the teachers' administration of the course and the examination process were eventually confirmed - the issue was resolved by identifying relative weaknesses in the exam answers of the South Grafton class compared with those of students from other schools - important issues remain.

South Grafton has come to represent forms of the question, 'What is the right kind of English?' - the literary 2 Unit Related course, or the language-oriented Contemporary English course?; and then of its pedagogic corollary, 'What should be the goals of HSC English?' They are questions which can only be answered by locating the teaching and administration of HSC English within the institution of the school, and by recognising that the school is organised at its higher levels around the exigencies of the HSC - exigencies which may be more closely bound to the need to produce a ranking for university entrance than to the

desire to practice a 'principled' mode of teaching (Hunter, 1994). Further, the institution of the school does not operate in isolation from the social and cultural contexts which exert their own pressures on the curriculum, in the form of both pedagogies and politics, and which in the case of English can readily be reproduced by the curriculum (see Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Giroux 1992).

The same reasons advanced for why English should be a compulsory HSC subject - to do with literacy, to do with the desirability of acquiring cultural capital, to do with the special status accorded to literature in the humanities curriculum (Hunter 1988), to do with the genealogy of English itself - are also those which explain why HSC English might also be the means of expressing and mobilising a cultural politics within the curriculum either by way of reproducing social and cultural privileges, or by way of enabling a principled confrontation with such differences. It may be therefore that English articulates most fully both the logic and the contradictions of the HSC, at precisely the point where it is impossible to be sure exactly how the goals of the subject are either accommodated or compromised by the goals of the institution of the school.

Teachers are obviously very much at the centre of this institutional issue. As the English teachers at the centre of the recent South Grafton HSC controversy in NSW found, English teaching at HSC level can be a risky business. But how is this risk constituted and is it evenly distributed across teaching situations? The South Grafton incident highlighted the plight of rural teachers of English in particular. How might the system around which the HSC is built, including syllabus reform, teaching and assessment, and examination and marking distribute this risk disproportionately such that certain teachers, for instance those in rural high schools, are most at risk? Teachers want to know how to minimise the risk of producing a bad result both for themselves and their students by ensuring that they are taught and examined in the 'right' English course - an issue which, as has been indicated, it is far from easy to be certain about.

### English Teacher Cultures

Mary Douglas argues in her book *How Institutions Think* that:

Institutions systematically direct individual memory and channel our perceptions into forms compatible with the relations they authorise. (Douglas 1987: 92).

In a study on the continued professional subservience of nurses in Australia, Stevens (1995) uses Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to explain the role of nurses in their own subjugation. Stevens argues that nurses perceive the discourse and practice of 'cure and curing' - played out in 'high tech' environments - as having more status and inherent professional power than that of 'care and caring' - usually associated with aged or community care. Nurses then, he argues, desire a certain kind of specialised and technical knowledge which they believe will bring them professional credibility and control. In reality, he says, this desire ensures their lack of power because their agency is always constrained by institutional hierarchies of control (see also Pusey 1991). Stevens' analysis can be applied to the HSC English system into which teachers find themselves inserted.

The HSC system is essentially a subsystem of the more extensive institutional education system which distributes cultural or symbolic capital, ie a form of power able to be exchanged for position and status to those within it. The ability to teach successfully within

the system which has constructed the HSC is a form of cultural capital.

The HSC is then implicated in the continued reproduction of occupational (and class) inequalities, but also, to use Stevens' analysis, in legitimating these inequalities to the public through the principles of merit and success (Postone, Li Puma & Calhoun 1993).

Atkinson (1985) says that individuals (or groups) can be involved in

the active reproduction of existing inequitable social structures which will then lead to the further exploitation of those same individuals. Stevens argues that this paradox can be explained using Bourdieu's concept of habitus. He states that a habitus is an internalisation of a culture (certain beliefs, attitudes and practices) by which different social groups can be distinguished. The habitus is a product of history and in turn, influences the future. Quoting Atkinson (1985), Stevens says that:

particular modes of perception, thinking and action are peculiar to specific groups and that groups are positioned in society by their own distinctive modes of understanding of themselves and their place in the world. This in turn acts to influence the way in which others (groups and individuals) perceive them. It puts individuals in their place by setting the limits to what is appropriate, commonsense behaviour. ... Through a habitus peculiar to them, social groups (classes and occupations for example) establish themselves within society (p.107).

Established groups then find it difficult to move outside their particular habitus because they do not possess the necessary cultural capital to operate successfully in a context where their habitus clashes with that of another more powerful group or groups. The shared habitus then not only legitimates existing inequitable power relations but permits their reproduction (Cicourel 1993).

What is the habitus of HSC English teachers and how does it intersect and interact with those of other groups (for example, bureaucrats and educational administrators) in the system-bound institutional setting of the HSC - including the process of syllabus reform and implementation? This is a crucial question because answers to it might help to illustrate how empowered, or otherwise, teachers feel within the process of curriculum reform in HSC English, and point to actions which English teachers might take to enable them to acquire more appropriate cultural capital so that feelings of professional risk can be mitigated.

#### What English Teachers Want to Know

Postone et al (1993) argue that Bourdieu's project has been to illuminate how the habitus of dominated groups can veil and hide the conditions of their own subordination. Bourdieu (1994) refers to this as a process of misrecognition. There is reason to believe that this process of misrecognition might well operate with teachers of HSC English. That is, their perception of what constitutes cultural capital might in fact be implicated in their own subjugation, and may work to reproduce risk, rather than lead to any sense of empowerment or control.

In order to construct a professionally competent role for themselves within the institution of the school, HSC English teachers have to

negotiate the disjunction between academic discourse about subject English and the more practical discourse of the school and the classroom. Because of institutional and social pressures, for example, the expectations of students and parents, the need for esteem with other teachers, and media treatment of subject English - as illustrated

by the South Grafton incident - teachers often express a preference for this practical discourse and perceive practical information and strategies as relevant cultural capital in the context of their professional classroom role (Piper 1989). The most practical knowledge of all is of course that relating to the examination process.

HSC English teachers tend to see practical knowledge like ideas for teaching, awareness of previous years' examination questions and examiners' comments, and knowledge about the marking process as appropriate and desirable cultural capital. In essence, this is the knowledge they perceive they need to be more in control of their work and to minimise the risk of exposing their professional competence to damaging critique. An argument can be advanced however, that theoretical knowledge about principles of language learning, literary and critical social theory, and functional grammar (Corcoran 1994) may well place teachers in a more powerful position in any process of reform, particularly when the discourse of reform is couched in these terms.

### Knowledge and the English Teacher

Support for the contention that the habitus of English teachers may actually serve to disadvantage rather than empower them can be found in the work of Habermas (see Pusey 1987 for an overview). Habermas (1972) has argued that our a priori cognitive interests structure what we perceive relevant knowledge to be and, in turn, influence our actions in the world. He put forward three universally given types of knowledge interests - which are not mutually exclusive but are characteristic of different types of sciences or endeavours: technical; practical; and emancipatory interests. Technical interests concern the finding out of what is; practical interests concern understanding what is, and making and sharing meaning with others; and emancipatory interests concern the penetration of illusions which veil arbitrary power in society. For Habermas, technical and/or practical knowledge can only become our servant if it is the product of autonomous critical reflection - characteristic of emancipatory knowledge interests. Both Grundy (1993) and Meyenn & Parker (1994) have applied this conceptual framework to leadership practices in education. There is no reason to suggest it cannot also be applied to the analysis of tendencies to action of HSC English teachers.

If Habermas is right, then it could be argued that English teachers' preferred action in the context of their professional world - the

search for practical knowledge - will, if not associated with autonomous critical reflection, serve to disadvantage rather than emancipate them. This is particularly so in the context of reform, where the very nature of the construction of what makes up the subject is being reviewed.

### The Need for Appropriate Research

The theoretical analysis above is not grounded in any in-depth work with HSC English teachers but is based on preliminary discussions with teachers about the curriculum review process in NSW. Given the Board of Studies current tight timeline for syllabus reform in NSW and the position of risk that teachers perceived themselves to be in, we believed there was an urgent need for appropriate research to further explore with English teachers their perceptions and understandings of: English as an HSC subject; the professional and institutional contexts in which HSC English is taught; and teachers' professional development needs in relation to HSC English.

We wanted to explore with teachers their immediate concerns regarding the specific content of HSC English courses from year to year, the examination process, and related issues. In addition, we wanted to find out what teachers felt about their involvement, or lack of it, in decisions about what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, and the institutional practices and policies which affect the quality of teaching of HSC English. Finally, we wanted to explore teachers' professional development needs in relation to the HSC English curriculum, in general, and also with regard to the current review process. To what extent teachers see themselves as active professional agents (McFadden 1995a) in the context of the classroom, and their perceived relationship to hierarchies of control - the HSC system at large - we believe is a crucial issue, and one on which we can shed little light at present.

### Preliminary Discussions

From preliminary discussions with teachers about the HSC review process throughout 1995, we found them, in general, uncertain about curriculum content and goals of senior English and concerned about the lack of direction about specific course content. In this context of lack of direction, as opposed to directives, in relation to teaching practice and content, teachers felt keenly the absolute constraint of the system of HSC English examinations. In a group discussion with English Head Teachers from all systems in the Central West area the following issues were raised as crucial concerns.

#### Teachers Not Certain About Methodology

The Board, through its syllabuses, has never addressed the methodology of English teaching. This leaves teachers without theoretical/academic

direction and dependent almost entirely on previous examinations and examiners' comments for guidance as to the content of English.

#### Exam As The Syllabus

In the absence of clear direction from the Board, the previous year's HSC exams are treated by teachers as the sufficient and authoritative expression of what is to be taught and learned in HSC English.

#### Examiners' Comments Not Consistent

Teachers expressed concerns that examiners' comments, published each year, came out too late to be of any real support for that year's HSC classes in English, and when they did arrive, were often not consistent with the comments of the previous year (with the exception of comments about 2 Unit Contemporary). This compounds the problems created by lack of direction.

#### Lack Of HSC Marking Experience

Given the above concerns about methodology and content, lack of HSC marking experience, and the absence of any structured opportunity to engage in the marking process, was felt by many to be an appreciable disadvantage. It only helped to make the process of examination and marking more opaque and remote.

#### Teachers Uncertainty About Change

Teachers criticised the review process for its top down model of development but expressed a view that a process of reform of HSC English was sorely needed. The sub-committee report (Board of Studies, 1995) indicates a need to bring English into line with conceptual and methodological developments in the subject, but provides no direction as to how this is to be done and does not discuss English teachers' present grasp of these developments. Topics like post-colonial criticism, feminist criticism, a functional approach to language, to

name a few, are specifically mentioned in the Board's review document. In the light of the curriculum directions stated in the document, teachers expressed concern about their own professional competency to implement the proposed curriculum in their classrooms.

#### The Research Project on HSC English

We concluded that the gap between the rhetoric of the Board's curriculum review document and the reality of teachers' concerns, as expressed by at the local meeting of Head Teachers of English may be a matter of more general concern in the English teaching community. We wanted to discuss in more detail with English teachers from a broad range of schools their concerns with developments in HSC English. We also felt that the Board of Studies needed to be made more aware of the current professional needs and interests of the English teaching community. We believed that this research had the potential to inform

both the curriculum development process and the production of relevant support materials for HSC English teachers.

In the last month, we have piloted a survey instrument<sup>2</sup> in two single-sex Catholic high schools - St Stephen's and St Joyce's<sup>3</sup> - and conducted group interviews with the English teachers in these schools about: the aims and goals of HSC English; their use of the syllabus documents, previous examinations and examiners' comments for each of the courses taught at their school; the effect of the HSC on their teaching; and their knowledge of the present HSC review process. We hoped that these interviews and questionnaires would shed some light on the gap between what the Board thinks is achievable change in HSC English and the reality of what English teachers feel they can competently deliver in the classroom. We also felt that it would give us a clearer picture of HSC English teachers' beliefs, attitudes and practices and point to variations across schools and courses.

#### A Tentative Reading of Results to Date

During 1989 and 1990 a research team of the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University conducted funded research, together with the NSW Department of School Education, into the development and implementation of the then new 2 unit Contemporary English course (Parker et al, 1992). This research included a statewide survey of English head teachers and case study work in six rural and metropolitan high schools.

The reported recommendations of this research project, although made in early 1992, related to a number of areas directly relevant to the stated concerns of the sub-committee of the Board of Studies which wrote the review document for HSC English. The CSU report represents the most recent systemic and systematic analysis of HSC English in NSW.

Recommendations made included those in the following areas:

- the changing nature and needs of the clientele in Years 11 and 12 and the development of curriculum and pedagogy to meet those needs
- the relationship of post-compulsory education at school to entry into tertiary education
- the need to develop alternative assessment and reporting procedures to cater for the changing clientele of HSC English, and
- the future development of English courses in the post-compulsory years.

The report stated that the current 2 unit General, 2 unit and 3 unit syllabuses in English (all heavily literature-based) were products of very different times, while the development of the 2 unit Contemporary

syllabus was seen as an impressive attempt to address the issue of appropriate curriculum to meet the needs of the diversity of students now staying on in the post-compulsory years of schooling. The initial intention of 2 unit Contemporary English was to deliver a curriculum option which was appropriate for students from non-English speaking backgrounds and less linguistically able students from English speaking backgrounds for whom a literature based course was inappropriate.

This intention was laudable but has been overtaken by a confusion about the appropriate clientele for each English course and a crisis of confidence in the HSC English examination system, particularly as it relates to the examination of 2 unit and 3 unit English. The community, and often school, perception of English course options is one of 'levels' and relative difficulty, rather than, as the Board would like, appropriate course choices for particular students.

Before we refer to our tentative reading of the results of the research to date it might be instructive to look in broad terms at the changing nature of HSC English from the point of view of shifts in candidature between courses. This of course has major impacts on the nature of the groups which teachers have in schools. The numbers for the HSC candidature as a whole, particularly in the last four years, have remained quite stable. We have chosen to illustrate the shifts among the course from 1991 to 1995. Table 1 gives you an overview of these shifts and points to some broad trends.

As you can see, the candidature for 2 unit General, the course which the Board argues is appropriate for the majority of candidates, has remained relatively stable as a percentage of the total candidature. The 3 unit course, a strongly literary course for very able students, has seen a steady decline in numbers relative to its size. Major shifts have occurred within the candidature for both 2 unit Contemporary English, a language based course originally written for NESB students and those in need of specific language skill work, and 2 unit Related English, a heavily literature-based course for students who enjoy and are good at English. In 2 unit Contemporary, there has been a steady and consistent growth in candidature, unlike 2 unit Related which has seen a steady decline. The actual make-up of the shifts in candidature cannot be interpreted from the graph or from bald numbers, but it is important to note that these shifts bring with them changed conditions at a school level and changing populations of students.

Table 1: Relative Growth in HSC English Subjects 1991 - 1995

A Tentative Reading of the Interview Data to Date

From the available interview data it would seem that teachers of HSC English are put at risk by the institution of the HSC for different reasons. What is clear is the way that, in the absence of clear direction to the contrary, teachers rely heavily on what they believe are practical tools to ensure examination success; for them the most important aim of HSC English teaching. For teachers at St Stephen's this led to feelings of discomfort. Judgements about teaching here were made in a context of uncertainty. HSC English teaching was 'a gamble'. At St Joyce's, decisions about teaching were made in an

environment described as comfortable. Teaching here was fun, and could be likened to a game where the rules were clearly understood. Game or gamble, in the context of reform, each position brings with it its own vulnerability.

At St Stephen's, the teachers were concerned about shifting patterns in candidature, which could not be discerned at a local level, affecting their ability to judge with any certainty either standards or prospective performance. In this context, there was a concerted effort being mounted to improve both the image and performance of English at the school. The Head Teacher, George, explains:

George:What we're trying to do, more fundamentally here is to build a culture in our school where English is important and seen to be an opportunity where boys, in particular, can achieve success. At a narrower level, clearly, in the HSC courses, success is only measured by marks, and given that it is now a compulsory, sort of, inclusion within the TER then those boys that want a TER, and that's most of them, then they need to perform well in English. So our concerns at the moment are probably less, um, less ethereal and more practical, um, just trying to, trying to improve the subject and its perception and through that process achieve better results within courses. And I suppose to go a step further one way that we have done that is to, ar, in a sense, (laughs) throw out a lot of philosophy and deal with what works as demonstrated in things like syllabus documents, sample answers, examiners' comments, sample papers, previous HSC questions and so on: fairly utilitarian really what we've been doing, and we don't know whether it will work, but we hope so.

From a different part of the interview, Doug, a young English teacher on staff points out how the shifts in candidature add to his uncertainty about performance:

Doug:It changes each year because the candidature changes, so you've got more students doing Contemporary each year so, like, while I was teaching Contemporary, it seemed to become harder to get better marks, so that, like you thought you had good kids in your class but each year they didn't seem to getting as high marks as, you know, equal ability kids did in the first year I was teaching it, so I mean there's been

that shift, and I think that basically comes down to people are choosing, you know, courses where they're going to get good marks and the result is that teachers are teaching for the exam and not necessarily teaching for an appreciation of literature, and they're probably disregarding the ideals of the syllabus and looking at marks.

An interesting feature of these statements is that, in this school, what actually counts as cultural capital has been changed by the pressures of the HSC system from literary knowledge to something measurable and statistical - which shifts from year to year - a mark for the TER. In fact, what starts to become clear is that students who have the required cultural capital can actually 'colonise' other courses, like Contemporary English, to maximise this exchange value, while others, for example, the students for whom the Contemporary course was originally designed, continue to do poorly. Some students can shop around for their best option. The broader point is that the TER has become a signifier of cultural capital, rather than an indicator of the success of an educative process. For example, it would seem that concepts rhetorically valued by the education system, like, learning as a process, have become less important than marks for performance. Teachers in this school feel uncomfortable about their ability to judge this shifting game.

Even in an ideal teaching situation, with three enthusiastic students, one of the teachers still did not feel comfortable in making a judgement about how the students would perform in the final examination, regardless of what she felt they had achieved in the course.

Sue: I don't know. I don't know how they'll go or anything ability wise, but, you know, there was a definite appreciation there, they were there to appreciate it, and there was just a great difference teaching, you know, this class ... I loved them.

From another section of the interview George supports this point:

George: In the back of your mind you're aware that, sort of, last year's students did well or did not do well, and they did that because they were a particular type, with particular skills, so last year's effort, whether it be great or not, says to you, well last year certain things were required that they did meet and they did well because of that, I think, because I don't know, nobody told me. Or they did poorly because they didn't do other things, I think, because nobody told me. So this year we'll make sure these things are covered, and these other things that weren't done, are done, but for each individual kid there's still a gamble really.

Part of the problem here seems to be the absence of a pedagogical frame or under-theorised frame, which gives teachers no hook on which to hang

their judgements about student performance. On the basis of our interviews, it seems that teachers believe that what students achieve in English is to do with their ability, taken to be 'natural'. In the absence of a curriculum which defines English and gives direction about methodology, particularly in relation to the study of literary text, teachers base their pedagogy on a notion of literary study as 'appreciation', a model of English teaching which is itself unteachable.

It appears that in the absence of a clearly defined pedagogy, the teachers at St Stephen's substitute the notion of 'relevance' in an implicitly developmental sense. They hope that by selecting 'relevant' texts they will lead their students to 'appreciation' at a local level, which they then hope will be transformed into performance and marks at a more general level, the HSC examination. In this way, the discourse of evaluation rules, and even confuses, the discourse of pedagogy; confusion, because lack of relevance can be blamed for the failure of pedagogy, thus abnegating responsibility for teaching choices. As well, there would seem to be a gendering of English at work here. The comments above came from a boys' high school. A different process seems to be at work in the girls' school where we did further interviews.

The way in which the English staff at this girls' school have negotiated the lack of definition and direction in HSC English is through a reliance on previous HSC examination papers for programming, not dissimilar to the previous school. But in this case the teachers mention the way in which they feel entirely comfortable about this process because the girls have a 'natural' aptitude for English, the subject is valued within the school, the expectations of the HSC are clear, and the girls do well in their examinations.

However, the terms comfort and natural need further examination here. It is an established argument that English is a feminised discipline (Lovell, 1987). The source of the feeling of comfort and the idea of 'naturalness', for the English staff at this school, stems from the

congruence between their 'mission statement', which emphasises the development of 'confident, literate and articulate young women' (St Joyce's English/History Department Handbook, 1995), and their experience about what constitutes success in HSC English. What is experienced as comfort by these teachers is the ease with which they are able to achieve their aim to develop girls as confident, literate and articulate young women at the same time as achieving success in HSC English by tapping the girls' 'natural' abilities.

In this school teachers felt free to innovate and did not feel constrained by examination pressures and requirements, rather teaching was an innovative 'game' which frequently featured role playing. It is

possible to see this pedagogy as the teachers helping the girls to refashion themselves to meet the text. To extend the 'game' metaphor, the search for new resources and ideas on texts was described by one teacher as 'marvellous fun', and examiners' comments were welcomed as 'reinforcement'. As one teacher said 'it's a reinforcement that the kind of syllabus I've set is the one they wanted'. In this way, HSC English teaching was a kind of guessing game where the rules were understood and the boundaries clear. But, as at the previous school, the most important outcome of HSC English teachers, regardless of this 'game', is to maximise marks.

Richard, the Head Teacher, explains this important emphasis on maximising marks, and Annie, the 3 unit teacher, qualifies this aim in terms of her own personal goals for English teaching:

Richard:... at a very primitive level we also want them to do as well as they possibly can in terms of HSC results. The majority of candidates here, the significant majority end up going on to tertiary study, so for them, as high a possible Tertiary Entrance Rank is what counts, and that's what we are always cognisant of, we're looking at what course, and what result is going to achieve the maximum in terms of TER benefit. OK, so, at a pragmatic level, that's our aim.

Annie:But, I think we would also want to add that I'd like to see them enjoy what they're learning and I'd like to see them also come away from this school with skills that they can translate in the real world, um, enjoyment of reading, enjoyment of speaking, you know, the things we're teaching them, they should be generic skills rather than necessarily specifically HSC focused or text focused.

This is similar to the concern at St Stephen's where they are trying to develop enjoyment through selection of 'relevant' texts. In both cases, reading is seen unproblematically (Phillip, 1994). As discussed in relation to St Stephen's, such a common sense understanding of reading (see also Belsey, 1980):

leaves the critic (student/teacher) at the mercy of her/his untheorised ideological positioning (Cranny-Francis, 1992: 28).

Even though these teachers feel very comfortable with the present structure, in a context of reform this position takes on its own vulnerability. As a result of significant change in HSC English, the teachers at St Joyce's could very well end up in the same position as the teachers at St Stephen's, that is, in a situation where they see the HSC as a 'gamble', in fact 'a bit of a lottery', rather than as a game they understand. Richard expresses this possibility when talking about the reform process:

Richard:... to my way of thinking it's going to be even more difficult now to get comparability of marking, it may be a bit of a lottery in

terms of what you choose and English has always been one of the hardest subjects because, in the old days, seven texts, seven now five, and they change. So, you know, you've gone to all this work, you've prepared all this useful stuff on the texts and the next time you come around two years later to teach it, can't do that, you've got to do it all again, and compared to what we are capable of doing in history where the syllabus is stable and you're able to develop good quality resources, high quality resources, do the job well, then do it better, then do it even better, in English its oh well ... starting off from scratch, and it happens year after year after year [brief comments of agreement from others]. So, it is really a very difficult subject for that reason. The step back to five texts is a great move, and I'm afraid, that the change may just necessitate a whole lot of new, from scratch, starting it all again.

In any form, change brings with it certain pressures. The present process of curriculum reform in HSC English is likely to bring about changes to the way that teachers perceive both the subject English and the way in which it is examined. The rules of the game will likely change. It is ironic that such changes may lead to more discomfort for teachers who believe they understand well the rules of the game now, than it will for those who are looking for direction. Both groups of teachers, it seems, have a common sense view of English rather than a theoretical or academic view of the subject (see McFadden, 1995b). Understandably, within the present system, their principal aim is to secure the maximum number of marks for individual students. In the absence then of any direction from the Board, apart from examinations and comments, we believe teachers are left either to tap what they see as 'natural' ability, or in a more developmental sense, to select 'relevant' texts to foster appreciation which they hope can then be exchanged for examination success.

## Conclusion

From our position, teachers are obviously the most important institutional link between policy and practice in the HSC English system. They are the ones who interact directly with the students the HSC system is intended to serve and have to cope with the shifts and changes in policy and clientele. Using this position as a base, teachers should be the ones who feel most supported and least at risk within the system, not most vulnerable. Teachers of HSC English should feel more in charge of the process of reform than they obviously do.<sup>4</sup>

In our further research we hope to uncover whether HSC English teachers, through their habitus - their beliefs and practices - are unintentionally compounding their own sense of professional risk. We hope our research will also point to directions and strategies which

will provide English teachers with more socially critical and powerful cultural capital to use as exchange currency in the process of curriculum reform. We also hope that we will be able to use the outcomes of the research to inform the development of relevant and useful teacher professional development programs and resources for teachers of HSC English.

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1 See the following press reports: 'Very dim view taken as class flunks exam' Sydney Morning Herald 10/2/95, p.3; 'Exam result fiasco: suing seen as poor solution' Sydney Morning Herald 11/2/95, p.2; 'The HSC time bomb - bad teachers', Sydney Morning Herald 14/2/95, p.18;

'Advanced English turns off HSC-wary students', Sydney Morning Herald 15/2/95, p.4; 'HSC report angers teachers: Findings on South Grafton 'insulting, gratuitous',' Sydney Morning Herald 18/2/95, p.9.

2 The small number of surveys completed does not allow us to draw any conclusions about the issues explored by the research.

3 We have applied for approval to approach government schools for our research but as yet approval has not been granted. We are following the usual practice of using pseudonyms for both the schools and the teachers involved in the research.

4 For example, the teachers interviewed believed that it demeaned them constantly to find out about policy changes to HSC structures through the media.

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