Curriculum, Literacy and the State: re ‘right’-ing English?

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ABSTRACT There are signs that English teaching – for much of the century absolutely central to the literacy project of State-sponsored schooling – may be in decline. This is something that can only become apparent in the course of history, as the new century generates its own distinctive educational forms and practices. Certainly, ‘English’ will continue to be taught and studied in the foreseeable future, with the English subjects remaining a significant part of the formal school curriculum. However, perhaps we are witnessing a major shift in what might be called the educational capital of English teaching and, hence, the effective, although always pending, end of the English ‘empire’. This article addresses such issues and debates in the context of national and international shifts and movements in educational policy and curriculum politics, in relation to the wider Australian context of the 1990s.

[T]he state must be conceived as an ‘educator’, in as much as it tends precisely to create a new type or level of civilisation. (Gramsci, cited in Donald, 1992, p. 30)

Preliminary Remarks
A number of preliminary points need to be addressed briefly. Elsewhere, I have argued that the relationship between literacy studies and curriculum theorising needs serious systematic scholarly attention, something curiously lacking to date (Green, 1993). Bringing together research in these two fields and thereby generating dialogue across them can only be advantageous. I want to suggest that policy studies have similarly tended to operate as a separate field, and that in this instance there is much of interest and relevance in the relationship between curriculum and literacy. Furthermore, there are important policy
implications of literacy and schooling, of increasing significance in the context of what has been described as the post-modern turn.

What seems very clear is that attending to the relationship between curriculum and literacy requires that due consideration is given to the nature of modern mainstream schooling, as both a State-sponsored educational apparatus and a key aspect of the larger social project of modernity. Understanding curriculum and literacy, in themselves and in their interrelationship, involves taking into account the political and epistemological relationships between speech and writing, between modernism and post-modernism, and between state and nation (Green, 1991, 1993, 1995). The emergence, evolution and crisis of State-sponsored schooling need to be analysed within a theoretical framework that brings together these different, but related concepts and problems. That is not my task here, though. My primary focus is on a particular realisation of the complex of curriculum, literacy and the State. However, I want to point to work such as Hinkson’s (1991, 1996) on the significance of what he calls ‘media of exchange’ with regard to (post-) modernity, state and education; and also recent work within a similar political and theoretical orientation on ‘post-modern education’, media culture, and the decoupling of curriculum and schooling (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1992; Giroux, 1992; Kenway et al, 1994).

Similarly, the collection edited by Lingard et al (1993) indicates the need to consider the State’s role in educational politics and reform. It focuses specifically on Australian education in the crucible period of the 1980s, with reference to similar moves in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the USA. Of particular interest here is a case-study of Western Australia (Porter et al, 1993), which presents both a comprehensive overview of reforms and debates in the 1983-1990 period, and a well-grounded theoretical account of local educational politics and the educational state. In a sense, what I offer here is a complement to that study and needs to be viewed in its light, if not its shadow. At the same time, there is value in looking closely, as I do here, at specific subject-areas, and curriculum practices and problems, as a supplement to the perhaps necessarily generalised and abstract sociological and policy accounts that can seem almost generic in accounts of state theory and educational policy. Furthermore, there is good reason to take into account particular changes and controversies in English teaching and literacy pedagogy, because of the longstanding centrality of language, literacy and the English subjects in the modernist project of state schooling. This is especially pertinent given recent arguments for the significance of notions of government and the symbolic order, with regard to schooling and social regulation more generally (Donald, 1992; Comber et al, 1998; Green, 1998).

Given the now well-documented relationship between English teaching and educational crisis in the post-1960s period, what happened
to English teaching in Western Australia in the 1980s is of considerable interest, both as a specific bounded instance of the ‘crisis’ in English teaching, and as a particular manifestation of it. In this article, accordingly, I want to examine this matter in some detail, seeking to locate English curriculum change in the context of cultural and curriculum politics more generally. I argue that shifts in curriculum focus, on the one hand, and the locus of curriculum control, on the other, are symptomatic of the contemporary nexus between English teaching and educational politics in changing socio-cultural conditions. Once again, this is to complement and hopefully extend an already existing study in the literature: O’Neill’s (1995) account of the politics and processes of curriculum change in Western Australia, with focus particularly on Lower Secondary English syllabuses. Of particular concern here will be the relationship between literacy debates and education policy, given that the 1980s saw questions of English teaching, language and literacy becoming overt objects of policy and public debate, and unprecedented degrees of State and governmental intervention. This culminated nationally, as already indicated, in the 1991 Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) (DEET, 1991), a watershed in the transition to an increasing focus on literacy in educational policy and practice, something which became more and more apparent over the course of the 1990s (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998).

Finally, reference needs to be made here toMarginson’s (1997) study of educational policy and politics in Australia. Marginson provides a comprehensive historical account of ‘[t]hree decades of Australian education’, focusing on government, politics and educational challenges and change (Peters, 1999). His study not only provides useful contextual information for my discussion here, but actually enriches the story, and our understanding of the social, cultural and political importance of English teaching and public education, as well as the links between them. His larger concern is with the changing character of Australian society over the period in question, within which he wants to emphasise the material and symbolic role and significance of education and schooling. As he writes:

[I]t is easy to justify a history which talks about this one social sector, for education has been central to the projects of government, to national identities and to the lives of almost every individual Australian in the period since 1960, though it has yet to receive its due attention from historians. (Marginson, 1997, p. xiii)

In similar fashion, English teaching has been fundamental to most people’s experience of schooling, with the post-1960s period being perhaps especially complex and complicated in this regard (Green, 1995). Hence, both English teaching, and education more generally, clearly matter, for reasons and in ways that may well be organically interrelated.
Marginson points to the interconnection of issues of literacy, citizenship, economics and education, and the emergence of a new form of society organised around markets. He thus provides a somewhat different take on what might be called the ‘post-modernisation’ of Australia.

For my purposes here, Marginson provides a useful account of what he calls ‘a power/knowledge/economy analysis’. He also usefully emphasises ‘government-as state and the domain of formal and informal politics implicated in and around the state’ (Marginson, 1997, p. xiv). His deliberate concern to bring together post-structuralist and especially Foucauldian work on discourse and governmentality with neo- and post-Marxist emphases on class, economy and state is an important, although not unproblematical resource for my own attempts to think through the history and politics of English teaching and public education (Green, 1995, 1998; Green & Beavis, 1996). Moreover, his account very usefully brings together policy studies and historical inquiry. Noteworthy here, is the sophisticated, informed account he offers of the so-called ‘New Right’, and especially his refusal of simplistic or monolithic assignments of identity to the New Right as an ‘actor’ in recent educational and cultural politics. Yet, outside of general references to the structure of the academic curriculum, he doesn’t touch on the significance of English teaching and the English subjects in this regard. Hence, I see my own account, here and elsewhere, as a more delimited contribution to the project of understanding Australian educational politics in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Re ‘Right’-ing Education and English Teaching in Western Australia

The 1980s saw decisive shifts in the nature of public educational provision, as the effects of larger forms of social crisis manifested themselves in education policy (Ball, 1990; Apple, 1993; Marginson, 1997). Within this, there were concomitantly major changes in English teaching.[1] This was an international phenomenon, as one would expect, given that the ‘crisis’ in question involved the whole spectrum of liberal-democratic and Western capitalist countries, including but obviously not limited to those for whom ‘English’ is a major educational concern. In this article, I concentrate on crisis and change in English teaching in the specific context of Western Australia. In various significant ways, the case – or maybe, the fate – of English teaching in this particular Australian state can be seen as an exemplary instance of ‘the crisis in English teaching’. More broadly, however, it is a register of crisis and change in public schooling.

I have indicated that this was, in particular, a crisis in and for the New English. However, it also had various ramifications and implications for English teaching historically and ideologically, since these changes
must be seen directly in the context of a changed and changing agenda for curriculum and schooling as a whole. This new agenda was geared more deliberately and emphatically to social and economic ‘reproduction’, and a new mode of regulation (Ball, 1990, pp. 15-16). It was informed, first, by the ideological concerns of liberal-conservative restoration and, secondly, by a reworked form of technocratic and instrumental rationality, within a general social-administrative discourse of accountability, efficiency and management. Central to such an agenda was a (renewed) emphasis on testing and assessment, and a shift in public and education policy to a stress on ‘outcomes’ and productivity, rather than, for instance, on matters of access, ‘input’ and equality of opportunity.

This meant important changes and shifts in emphasis for English teaching, particularly as formed in accordance with the principles and paradigms of post-Dartmouth versions of English curriculum. Furthermore, it involved a significant shift in the political economy of English teaching within education more generally, with the distinction between ‘education’ and ‘economy’ weakening as the effects of economic downturn became more marked, and a new logic of production replaced that of consumption in shaping educational policy and English curriculum change (Green, 1995; see also Knight et al, 1993, pp. 10-11). What this meant, in practice, was an increasing emphasis on literacy education, understood in a particular way – that is, within a renewed rhetoric of ‘skills’ and ‘training’ – and within this, an increasing stress on literacy assessment, increasingly conceived officially and in popular-public sensibility as the specific task of subject English.

Porter et al (1993, p. 240) trace ‘substantial continuity’ and, indeed, ‘a linear progression’, ‘a growing elaboration of action towards a corporate managerial and devolved model of schooling, within which concerns for equity remain prominent if defined differently’. Their analysis focuses on four key documents in this period, from the Beazley and McGaw Reports of 1984 through Managing Change in the Public Sector (Burke, 1986) to Better Schools in Western Australia (Pearce, 1987). At the same time, they point to a discontinuity across the documents and the overall policy environment, in attempting to articulate economic rationalism and social justice in a single agenda, which they understand as a particular dilemma for a ‘Hard Times/New Times’ Labour Government (cf. Fitzclarence & Kenway, 1993). Among other things, they discuss the Unit Curriculum model, which they describe as ‘[t]he most far reaching result of the Beazley Report ... as a solution to the need to eliminate the adverse social effects of academic streaming, while still catering for the multiplicity of student interests, talents and abilities’ (Porter et al, 1993, p. 243). As they note, however, there were major implementation problems with the Unit Curriculum, and much associated controversy.
O’Neill (1995) similarly provides a critical case study of ‘Unit Curriculum English’, comparing and contrasting it with its predecessor syllabus in the lower secondary school, ‘Achievement Certificate English’. With regard to the latter, she notes first an initial shift in syllabus design in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the then dominant English-as-Literature paradigm to what, following Ball et al. (1990), she describes as ‘Progressive English’ (O’Neill, 1995, p. 167). Then, with the post-Beazley Unit Curriculum, she traces another major shift, ‘from a progressive personal growth orientation to a skills-based functional English orientation’ (O’Neill, 1995, p. 174). That is, ‘syllabus orientation had been shifted from ...Progressive English to ... English as Skills’ (O’Neill, 1995, p. 175) or what she describes as ‘functional English’ (O’Neill, 1995, p. 160). By the end of the 1980s, at a national level, this in turn was folded (somewhat awkwardly) into both new national curriculum proposals, including an English Statement and Profile, and national literacy policy initiatives. However, the ground had been effectively prepared in this way, in Western Australia, for a restructured curriculum and literacy field in Australia more generally – a new educational order (O’Neill, 1995, p. 183).

Central to this restructuring and re-organisation was a new focus on literacy, linked directly and expressly with assessment and testing, and moreover with an explicit pedagogy of ‘skills’ and ‘methods’. I have sought to understand this in terms of what I call the ‘re-birth’ of the teacher: the re-assertion of pedagogic authority, as a register of social and cultural authority more generally (Green, 1998). This played out in Western Australia in a prolonged media debate about educational standards and literacy crisis, with quite specific policy implications and ramifications. The influence of such debate is inscribed in the Report, in comments such as the following: ‘There is an urgent desire on the part of the community that special attention be given to standards of literacy and numeracy’ (Beazley, 1984, p. 76). This links, in turn, to the following Recommendation:

That in response to community expectations and because of the changing demands of the workforce, special attention be given to the need to raise the general standards of literacy and numeracy. (p. 77)

The implications for English teaching were considerable, in ways that are now quite familiar.

Of course, literacy had been on the agenda previously, both as part of English teaching and as an across-the-curriculum concern. However, it had been differently constructed and understood, certainly within the profession, but also within the broader educational community, including the bureaucracy. The Martin Report (subtitled ‘What Goes On in English Lessons’) had been formally released in 1980, with official endorsement (Education Department of Western Australia, 1980). Located firmly within
the London School tradition, it presented case studies of English teaching in Western Australia and sought to articulate ‘a unifying theoretical conception’ for the subject area. Within this rationale, literacy was clearly marked as important, but equally clearly it was seen as subordinated to language and literature as foci for teaching and learning in English classrooms. The Report is appropriately read alongside a Departmental Policy Statement (No. 19) released in 1979, under the title ‘Language, Literacy and Literature’ (Education Department of Western Australia, 1979). They are both informed by a common orientation to English teaching, and to the place and significance of literacy, and they exhibit similar tensions and ambivalences, ideologically and discursively. Note the following:

All teachers share the responsibility of promoting language and literacy. This responsibility is related to the student’s use of the whole language environment as a resource to draw on in understanding the world. Teachers of English have, in addition, the particular responsibility of encouraging the development of the imaginative, the creative, the fantastic and the poetic aspects of a child’s experience through the study of literature. (Education Department of Western Australia, 1979, p. 2)

The Statement’s title is significant, too, stressing a particular formation of English teaching. Although ‘language’ is thematised, the perceived importance of ‘literature’ remains very clear. Indeed, the position endorsed here is manifestly associated with the New English, in its classically ‘Progressive’ orientation. I have discussed this Statement more fully elsewhere (Green, 1991, pp. 309-313), as well as the discourse of the New English more generally (Green, 1990, 1995, 1997). The point to make here is that ‘literacy’ is presented as framed by ‘language’ and ‘literature’, and as subordinated to language usage and development, on the one hand, and literary culture and practice, on the other. In this way, the Statement may be seen as symptomatic in this regard, as indeed is the Martin Report.

Nonetheless, the Martin Report demonstrates that there was general concern about English teaching practice and also literacy in the period leading up to the (post-) Beazley initiatives. Yet there was no reference at all to either the Martin Report or Policy Statement No. 19 in the Beazley Report (subtitled ‘Education in Western Australia’) or the McGaw Report, both released just 4 years later. Discursively, economically, politically, there were now very different conditions of educational change and debate.
Literacy Debates, Education Policy, and English Curriculum Change

At this point, I want to turn to the matter of literacy debates, and their significance both for educational policy and for English curriculum change. My concern is with the nature and significance of alleged literacy crisis, as ‘perceived’ in the media (and, hence, in national-popular sensibility), and as ‘responded to’ in government reports and educational policy. There is a strong sense in which literacy crisis maps readily onto more general educational crisis, conceived as a crisis in public schooling and popular education. Furthermore and more specifically, it is characteristically associated with perceived ‘problems’ in the curriculum practice of English teaching. What must be noted here, once again, is the important linkage between literacy and schooling, on the one hand, and between English teaching and popular education, on the other. This is a matter of general State initiative and active intervention, and also of the cultural-historical nexus of language, ideology and education. It is also a matter of generalised social discipline, in a more Foucaultian sense.

The ideological work of the media is clearly crucial in this respect. Alliances between governments, the mass media and public figures of note, around specific educational issues of concern to the New Right – for instance, ‘literacy’ or ‘standards’ – need to be taken into account, because the relationship between literacy debates and educational policy involves the significant orchestration and intervention of the media, especially newspaper reporting. The media must be recognised as an important ‘agent-form’ in the construction of educational crisis, which in this case involves direct consideration of the nexus between English teaching and the politics of literacy. Of course, the actual influence of media-orchestrated literacy debates on educational policy and practice is hard to gauge, but at the very least it can be recognised as a significant organiser of public educational discourse.

The Beazley Committee of Inquiry was established in 1983 by the then incoming Labour Government. In his pre-election policy speech, Premier Burke had declared that, if elected, his government would ‘institute the most comprehensive inquiry ever conducted into the future direction of education in Western Australia’ (cited in Tully, 1987, p. 2). During the period of inquiry, there was an intense public debate on educational standards, focused particularly on literacy issues. This was largely conducted through the media, with particularly heavy newspaper coverage, along with various other, secondary forums. The ‘debate’ ran continuously through the best part of the deliberations of the Beazley Committee, roughly from June 1983 to April 1984, and there is little doubt that it exerted a significant influence on the Committee's formulations, particularly given the way ‘public opinion’ functioned as a major reference-point in the Report.
Such media involvement in educational debate was not restricted to Western Australia. It became increasingly a feature of public debate on education in Australia over the 1980s (Kenway, 1990; Marginson, 1997), although momentum in this respect had gathered over the latter part of the 1970s. A similar phenomenon is to be observed in the United Kingdom, as has been indicated, as well as in the USA. Increasingly, the media was playing a significant role in educational politics generally, as the ‘crisis’ in public schooling became more markedly a matter of overt concern.

Of particular interest in the West Australian context is how literacy and schooling are represented, and the effects of this on English teaching. An early editorial initiated the ‘debate’, setting the tone thus:

Few people would agree that a return to an education system concentrating solely on literacy and numeracy was a good idea. All the same, many have been dismayed by the trend in recent years towards bypassing traditional areas of learning in support of nurturing less tangible aspects such as student identity, individuality and creativity. (West Australian, 2 June 1983 [editorial])

With the agenda set up in this way, the debate proceeded in an entirely predictable way, initially with various academic figures weighing in with sharp criticisms of current school-leavers as they moved into the tertiary sector, followed by a second phase featuring representatives from business, industry and employer groups. Whereas the former were concerned with what was perceived to be marked inadequacies as regards ‘essayistic literacy’ skills, the latter focused more emphatically on ‘basic skills’ in the usual sense. This set in train, accordingly, what has been described as the discourse of ‘functional literacy’. In the course of the debate, the effective conflation of ‘literacy’ with, on the one hand, ‘education’ more generally, and on the other, with ‘English’, produced a connotative relationship among these categories in the public sphere. Couched in alarmist, deficiency terms, the ‘crisis’ in literacy was linked directly to perceived problems in the nature and quality of teachers and public schooling, and serious reservations were expressed about current trends in English teaching. A classic ‘moral panic’ pattern was activated, and characterised the debate generally (Pyvis, 1986). Statements such as the following are illustrative:

It is incredible that students can go through school with appalling reading and writing deficiencies that are not corrected. The solution may be remedial teaching but the problem is teaching itself. (West Australian, 13 December 1983 [editorial])

Students who are not literate are propaganda fodder for teachers who wish to indoctrinate them rather than teaching them the basic skills they lack. (West Australian, 16 December 1983 [letter-to-the-editor])
A good proportion of the blame for the illiteracy and bad spelling of school leavers must rest with the teaching system. [...] The other proportion of the blame rests with the fact that a big proportion of children these days probably spend more time watching television than reading – thus the written word is not as prominent. (West Australian, 16 December 1983 [letter-to-the-editor])

Hence, what Ball (1987) describes as the perceived problem of ‘politically motivated teachers’, functioning as ‘folk devils’, links up with a view of television as cultural corruption, and the collapse of traditional institutions and forms of authority.

The Beazley Report represented, therefore, and in several senses, a decisive ‘crisis’ in English teaching. This was registered, first, in a recommended move away from its hitherto compulsory status and traditional centrality in terms of credentialing and final examinations, and secondly, in its proposed redefinition as ‘functional English’. This links with the question of literacy, in that the position adopted in the Report on literacy involved both an effective conflation of subject English and literacy pedagogy, and a generalised technocratic rationality of the kind associated with the discourse of ‘functional literacy’. That is to say, of the available discourses in literacy – to be identified broadly with the notions of ‘functional’, ‘cultural’ and ‘critical’ literacy, respectively (Green, 1991) – the Report both focused on and was organised by the discourse of ‘functional literacy’. This is partly because of the dominant-discursive association of ‘literacy’ with ‘standards’ and, hence, with matters of assessment, measurement and testing. As much recent critical-sociological literacy scholarship indicates, this is a view of literacy which is at once highly politicised and particularly restricted, with serious implications concomitantly and, consequently, for educational practice (Street, 1995; Lankshear, 1987, 1998; Luke, 1996). As Lankshear (1987, p. 72) observes: ‘Different literacies ... may have very different political implications’. Further, different versions of literacy represent competing and often conflicting sectional interests, challenging therefore the normative, current-traditional view of literacy as neutral, unitary and essentially an independent variable (Lankshear, 1987, p. 39). Yet it is clear that this view of literacy informed the Beazley Report, and so its recommendations on curriculum change and the re-organisation of school practice both embody and enact an ideology of paradigmatically ‘improper’ literacy (Lankshear, 1987). Why and how it happened is a matter of considerable interest, regarding not just the more general relationship between literacy debates and educational policy, but also, more specifically, English curriculum change and educational politics.
Changing Senior English Teaching in Western Australia

What specifically were the effects of such intense work in both the popular public sphere, as orchestrated by the media, and educational policy? What happened to English teaching in the aftermath of Beazley and McGaw? It is useful at this point to recall that central to both reports were recommendations focused on matters of literacy and assessment, and their formal articulation. Moreover, although this was consistent with developments elsewhere in Australia, there is a case to be made that the Western Australian situation was exemplary in this regard.[2] As Nay-Brock (1987, p. 91) observed at the time: ‘Of all the eight Australian educational systems, it was that of Western Australia which was in the greatest state of flux in the senior secondary English curriculum’. He concluded his account of Western Australian changes in the Upper School English subjects with the observation that ‘[a]ll this adds up to a state of some uncertainty!’ (Nay-Brock, 1987, p. 109). His assessment of the situation may be extended to English teaching in Western Australia more generally.

A furor was generated by the McGaw proposal to omit English from the group of Upper School subjects required for tertiary admissions (McGaw, 1984). It is noteworthy that English Literature retained its place, since the whole thrust of the Beazley/McGaw deliberations, organised by the interventions of Professor Michael Scriven [3], was that there was significant duplication in the two subjects. Correspondingly, there was less emphasis than there needed to be on ‘functional English’. Furthermore, that English was ill-defined to the point of being indefensible. Another consideration likely to have influenced the decisions eventually made was that the Literature course had a recognisable, familiar, and long-established disciplinary and institutional base, and also a clearly defined examination structure.[4] In addition, it is likely that the Literature course, as then constituted, represented a traditional culturalist agenda, in the literary-ideological sense, drawing as it did significantly on the private school sector for its constituency.

Hence, it may have been hoped to preserve a ‘cultural’ dimension in the Upper School curriculum, but to complement it by legislating a clearly marked ‘functional’ dimension. Radically redefining English along these lines or by ensuring that literacy was given specific and more formal attention in Upper School pedagogy generally would have produced this. As it happened, the McGaw Report opted for a somewhat awkward combination of these two options. On the one hand, it proposed that English be redesigned as a course in ‘functional English’, rather ambiguously conceived along the lines of Scriven’s arguments in this regard. On the other hand, it stressed the need for a whole-school perspective on literacy pedagogy, as a significant dimension in all forms of school and subject-area learning. This was an explicit gesture towards
the principle of ‘language-across-the-curriculum’ which featured also in Bullock (Ball, 1987; Ball et al, 1990).[5]

In the event, the proposal to omit English from the Group 1 subjects, widely perceived as effectively ‘downgrading’ the subject, met with such resistance and provoked such controversy that ‘[p]redictably in the face of this pressure, English was reprieved’ (Tully, 1987, p. 108). Ironically, among the state’s universities and other tertiary institutions, the University of Western Australia opted to work with the original proposal, despite the fact that its own English Department had vigorously criticised both the recommendation in question and the general thrust of the Beazley/McGaw inquiry into English teaching and literacy standards. One of the most vehement critics of the proposal regarding Upper School English was Professor John Hay, of the University’s English Department. As he asserted: ‘Nothing is more certain than that literacy will decline if English is devalued’ (The Sunday Times, 19 April, 1984). Professor McGaw replied 2 weeks later to what he described as Professor Hay’s ‘misleading analysis of the report’, emphasising that ‘we did not call for “an unprecedented downgrading of English”’, as had been suggested in subsequent newspaper accounts, and that the focus of the report was on the nexus between secondary school graduation and literacy accreditation. McGaw observed that the decision to nominate English Literature as a tertiary admissions prerequisite, and not English, was based on two reasons, as follows:

One was that students must first satisfy the strong requirement for English competence at year 12 level before their admissions average should even be considered. We would expect many students to meet this requirement by taking the subject English, since it would still be available. The second reason for suggesting English not contribute to a student’s final admissions average was that many students currently take the English examination and do very well without actually studying the subject. Most do this by studying only English Literature but taking the examinations in both subjects.

As he concluded: ‘This suggests that to allow English to count in a three-subject average for tertiary admissions would provide too soft an option’ (The Sunday Times, 2 April 1984, p. 6, my emphasis). This article was followed by a flurry of others debating the issue, including one reporting Beazley’s own response to the controversy and quoted him to this effect: ‘I interpret the McGaw Report as recommending that the teaching of functional English be established in WA high schools’ (The Daily News, 10 April 1984, my emphasis). Crucially, the question of literacy was foregrounded throughout, and there is little doubt that this had become the central organising principle for English curriculum discourse, both professionally and in the public forum more generally.
Following this, there was a period of extensive revision of the Upper School English subjects.[6] I want to make reference to one initiative in this respect, however. In 1987, the Secondary Education Authority, the body formally responsible for syllabus authorisation, and assessment and credentialing procedures, issued a discussion paper under the title ‘Changing Role of Subject English in Post-Compulsory Schooling’ (de Garis et al, 1987). Its release further indicates the increasing importance of the category ‘literacy’ in educational policy in the period in question here. It was prefaced by a statement from the Authority’s Chair, Dr Mossenson, briefly contextualising the paper in relation to changes in upper secondary schooling, following the recommendations of the Beazley and McGaw Reports, and indicating that English had been designated a ‘priority’ concern in this regard:

The study of English and related subjects assumes special significance among areas of study in the post-compulsory years. The importance of English is reflected in the fact that almost all students study English courses as part of their upper school programme. (Preface to de Garis et al, 1987)

It was suggested, furthermore, that adequate preparation in English is appropriately considered ‘one of the most critical of life skills’. There was a strong implication that ‘competence in the use of English’ was intimately linked to educational success, not just on the part of students, but also, significantly, that of the education system itself. This point about the school population and English enrolments confirms, then, that a significant connection exists between English and schooling, expressly from an administrative-bureaucratic point of view – in terms, that is, of what Cook-Gumperz (1986, p. 33) describes as ‘the professionalisation of schooling’.

A view of English as ‘a mobile subject’ was presented, and as particularly sensitive to changing socio-economic and cultural conditions and to the play of competing interests and investments. ’Change’ was a specifically marked term in the account and language – more particularly, ‘proficiency with language’ – was presented as an essential element in those forms of education deemed necessary to equip young people with the ‘life skills’ required for living in ‘this rapidly changing world’ (de Garis et al, 1987, p. 2). It is worth citing in full here the passage summarising what is described as ‘the context for change’:

The challenge to prepare students of post-compulsory age for the rapidly changing world is an immense and immediate one. These students will enter a world where: a full life-time of work cannot be anticipated; family and social units are increasingly mobile; political and industrial systems are more centrally based; individual responsibility for financial management (e.g. banking, purchasing, taxation, welfare, insurance, mortgages) is increasingly complex; more
information is available to be collected, selected and processed; the technologies of information handling are moving towards automation and electronic retrieval; and, communications through the mass media have brought about new jargons, usages and effects with language. (de Garis et al, 1987, p. 2 [original format amended])

A brief account of ‘Directions of Change’ noted recent trends and developments in post-compulsory schooling in the wider Australian context, and briefly summarised Western Australian initiatives of this kind. An overview of ‘Change and Subject English’ followed which made specific reference to recent English syllabus work in the lower secondary context, and presented an account of the relationship between literacy and English teaching: ‘Of the various aspects of subject English, the question of literacy is currently receiving the most attention’ (de Garis et al, 1987, p. 7). The position taken in this regard was as follows:

In the present debate about literacy the term is being used to mean having competence in reading, writing, listening and speaking. The confident and appropriate use of these language modes, in the community, is seen to be the mark of a literate person.

Furthermore:

The school has a responsibility for developing these skills [sic] across the curriculum. Teachers of English have a particular role to play because as language specialists they are best placed to help students understand the nature of language and the role of language in learning.

They are expected to ‘teach’ the processes involved in reading, writing, speaking and listening. (de Garis et al, 1987, p. 7)

Reference was then made to the Beazley recommendation that ‘English teachers should have a key responsibility in raising literacy standards’, and hence, ‘in the framing and implementation of English syllabuses for secondary schools more emphasis should be placed on functional English’ (de Garis et al, 1987, p. 7; my emphasis). Clearly, the agenda had been firmly established by this point, shaped significantly by the New Right discourse on ‘functional literacy’ and ‘educational standards’ (Marginson, 1997 – what Lankshear (1998) has described as a rhetoric of ‘lingering basics’ in more recent educational reform. ‘Competence’, ‘skills’, ‘teaching’, ‘processes’ were key terms in the revised educational agenda and a shift in policy priorities, with specific regard to the relationship between curriculum and literacy, as well as the rhetoric of critique associated with the proponents of anti-progressivism and the restoration of educational order. The paper went on to propose that the Upper School English subjects be reshaped so as to incorporate specific ‘literacy objectives’, and, hence, allow for the specification of literacy teaching in the post-compulsory schooling context, for all students.
There are several points to note here: first, a significant category confusion as to ‘English’, ‘language’ and ‘literacy’, registered in, but also enabling too ready an identification of subject English and literacy education; secondly, a significant absence, in real terms, of a proper understanding of the importance of context in considerations of literacy and learning. Relatedly, there were marked ambiguities and inadequacies in the view of subject English itself and the English subjects more generally – a curriculum-theoretical issue. That is, the concept of ‘literacy’ and the role of ‘English’ in school learning generally (i.e. the English language as the principal medium of learning across the school curriculum and at all levels of schooling). Finally, the paper clearly based its understandings and proposals, with respect to English curriculum reconceptualisation, specifically on post-Beazley work, revising the English syllabus at the lower secondary level. This suggests that the revisionary work of the Lower Secondary English Syllabus Working Party had been effectively endorsed by the official parties concerned, as at least heading in appropriate and desirable directions, in terms of current policy.

**Literacy Rules, OK?**

By the latter part of the 1980s, there had emerged a new discourse on English teaching in Western Australia, and, therefore, a new paradigmatic expression of English teaching itself: the ‘English-as-Literacy’ paradigm (cf. Ball et al, 1990). A new syllabus was in operation and a more regulated English classroom practice resulted. This was not without resistance and struggle, or argument, on the part of the profession. Furthermore, there can be little doubt that the version of subject English eventually arrived at and formally authorised, included elements and emphases which were positive and progressive in terms of English curriculum change and reconstruction, especially as professional concerns asserted themselves in the curriculum design and negotiation process. However, this was contextualised and over-determined by new agendas and priorities in educational policy, and by the general logic and interests of administration and management. The system had become more organised and accountable, in terms both of fiscal and budgetary considerations, and of the relationship between knowledge and control. Within these frames, English teaching had been changed considerably and decisively.

It needs to be recognised, moreover, that the versions of literacy and English teaching which had been officially endorsed in this fashion were a selection from a much larger set of possibilities. The shift from Martin to Beazley and beyond involved a significant shift from the literacy project of the New English in its classical liberal-progressivist phase – ‘the literacy of personal discovery’ and self-esteem, of ‘exploration and
infinite differentiation’ (Ball et al, 1990, p. 80) - to ‘the literacy of skills’ and a very differently-configured English teaching. That such a move had a definite political significance, involving a changed relation to the State, is indicated in the following assessment of this ‘literacy of skills’:

Here the primary emphasis is upon competitive individuals acquiring skills and competencies required by the market and the economy. Correct forms of expression and presentation of self are of primary importance[,] the standards and criteria for which are determined by the educational state acting on behalf of ‘industry’. The relation of education to the state is exercised in terms of the state’s role in providing the social and technical conditions for the reproduction of capitalism. (Ball et al, 1990, p. 77)

This was, then, the preferred discourse on literacy. Little official regard was made of those forms of English teaching organised around notions of the literary canon and the ‘cultural heritage’, that is, ‘English as ‘great literature’ and ‘the literacy of morality’ (Ball et al, 1990, pp. 78–79), and hence, of the essentially conservative discourse of ‘cultural literacy’. What is noticeable is a general lack of support for this perspective in Western Australian English teaching, as elsewhere in Australia, at least in lower secondary school (Nay-Brock, 1987). Arguably, however, it remained influential, particularly in the Upper School and especially in the private school sector, as indicated very clearly in the curriculum politics associated with the attempt at this time to introduce new literary-theoretical and pedagogical initiatives into the English Literature course.[7]

Even more significantly, there was an almost total disregard for what has been described as ‘English as a form of critical literacy’, that is, socially critical versions of English teaching, which Ball and his colleagues call ‘radical’ English’ (Ball et al, 1990, p. 80). This ‘critical literacy’ orientation represents a road definitely not taken, as regards English curriculum change in Western Australia. It could well have been, especially given the explicit introduction of media texts into the English domain, in both the Lower Secondary English Syllabus and the Upper School English course, and growing signs of a cultural studies orientation in English teaching (Green, 1995, 1997). Had such options been taken up, they might have produced a radically different version of the ‘English-as-Literacy’ paradigm, one defined very clearly in terms of critical pedagogy and cultural criticism, and consciously linked therefore to the project of critical-democratic schooling. That this did not happen was, in hindsight, both predictable and understandable.

As I have suggested, perhaps the single most comprehensive and influential account of subject English and the State is that of Ball and his colleagues (Ball et al, 1990), now a major reference-point in the literature. This work has demonstrated very clearly that a close and integral relation
exists historically between English teaching in its current-traditional form and the State. There have been two moments of particular intensity and heightened activity in this regard: the period immediately following World War I, as registered in texts such as the Newbolt Report and George Sampson’s ‘English for the English’; and the period from the mid-to late 1970s on. ‘English’ becomes a matter of overt state and governmental concern in times of marked crisis and change, and moreover of nation-(re)building. That was clearly the case for Britain in the Thatcher-Major period (Ball, 1993). Although differently-inflected, the same holds for Australia since at least the early seventies, with a major impetus coming a decade later with the election of a (post-)modernising Labour Government in 1983. From this time on, the so-called ‘clever country’ has sought to re-position itself in a globalising economy and to re-orientate itself geopolitically to the Asia-Pacific region.

Conclusion

Two observations can be made here, briefly. The first concerns the very question of the State, and the thesis of not only a fundamental transmutation in and of the Australian State, but also the emergence of a distinctively ‘new’ State form. This is a contentious issue, and it remains still to be adequately explored (Hinkson, 1991, 1996; Lingard, 1993, 1996; James, 1996). The other observation concerns the relationship between ‘literacy’ and ‘English’. Ball’s account assumes perhaps far too readily that the ‘road not taken’ – that is, ‘Radical English’ or the full realisation of the ‘English as Critical Literacy/Cultural Criticism’ paradigm – is possible or, indeed, even intelligible, especially given the history of the field and its investments in the ‘literary’. Something that hasn’t been considered that this may be not simply a ‘re-route-ing’ of the project of English, but a total ‘re-write’: a way ‘outside’ altogether – a move away from English, in short, into what may prove to be entirely new curriculum and cultural formation. What has been very evident over the 1990s, in Australia at least, is not just the rise into professional and disciplinary prominence of what is called the New Literacy Studies, but also, and importantly, the ascendancy and, indeed, institutionalisation of the rhetoric of ‘critical literacy’ (Christie et al, 1991; Comber, 1994; Muspratt et al, 1997). It can even be argued that the most influential positions in contemporary curriculum and literacy work are those now associated with ‘language and literacy’, rather than English teaching, at least as it has been traditionally understood (Christie, 1995). It is in this sense, I suggest, that English teaching per se may now be in a state of declining power and influence in education, with its explanatory and executive significance clearly lessening with regard to the curriculum and literacy project of the (post-)modern school. That, too, remains to be seen. Even so, it is surely an intriguing, if disturbing thought.
It has been argued (Porter et al, 1993) that what distinguished the Australian manifestations of the New Right in education was the attempt to maintain a social justice and equity agenda, within and despite moves towards corporate managerialism and economic rationalism on the meta-policy level.[8] This leads to a more sanguine view of educational reform in Western Australia than might otherwise be the case. I am not convinced on that point. In the course of the 1980s, English teaching in Western Australia changed decisively, redefined in accordance with the political ascendancy of the New Right and the emerging imperatives of the Market. Professionally, important ground had been lost and significant curriculum memories erased, in what was quintessentially the generation of ‘crisis’ and the renewal of hegemony. Notwithstanding official post-Beazley policy orientations towards inclusivity and the alleviation of social disadvantage, the endorsement of a particular discourse on literacy - one which is socially and politically problematical - had real implications for curriculum more generally, closing down and otherwise constraining the kind of critical-democratic possibilities that might well be the goal of moves towards educational reform. In the end, a new settlement emerged, and the State assumed a much more explicit and active role in the changing and complex relationship between curriculum and literacy - a project clearly carried through, and consolidated, in the 1990s (Piper, 1997; Comber et al, 1998).

It is useful to look back, in conclusion, to a much earlier twentieth century Australian evocation of the role and significance of English teaching and the English subjects. Peter Board, a distinguished Director of Education in New South Wales, wrote powerfully of the importance of children acquiring in schools what he called ‘equipment for life’, noting further that this should never be understood in simple utilitarian terms. He expressly refused any distinction between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘utilitarian’:

[A] national education system that attempts to justify itself on ground that the nation must be saved from illiteracy could very well make the age of eight or nine the age for compulsory attendance, for by that age the child under ordinary school conditions has ceased to be illiterate. But it is recognized that something more than mere literacy is necessary to make public education serve any national purpose.

Intellectual and moral refinement are certainly as necessary in nation-building as reading, writing and arithmetic. The cultural is nationally utilitarian. (Board, 1932, p. 80)

Furthermore: ‘English is the cornerstone of the curriculum, for it is the subject the treatment of which in the school contributes the largest quota towards the ultimate equipment of the pupil for life’ (Board, 1932, p. 86). Although he was referring here to the primary school curriculum, and clearly working within what is a now familiar ‘imperial’ register,
nonetheless this was clearly part of his vision for schooling more generally. Notwithstanding a general focus now on nation-(re)building, it is surely a mark of the distance we have travelled since then that a view such as this is unlikely, to say the least, to inform contemporary curriculum policy.

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Notes
[1] For England and Wales, see Ball et al (1990); for Scotland, see Stoop (1992); and for New Zealand, see Bell (1994).
[2] I have provided an intensive account of reform and structuring in English teaching in the lower secondary school (Green, 1991; see also O’Neill, 1995). Consequently, I focus here on the Upper School.
[3] I have elsewhere documented and analysed Professor Scriven’s role in the Western Australia literacy debate and its impact on education policy at the time in question here, arguing that he functioned as an exemplary ‘primary definer’ (Green, 1991). Although a non-English specialist, he nonetheless assumed and was assigned the role of (English) curriculum ‘expert’, although his actual expertise was more in evaluation and assessment. His discursive role might be compared and contrasted with that of Nancy Martin, for the earlier phase.
[4] It also had less enrolments relative to the total final-year school population; for example, approximately 26% of the total cohort in Year 12 over the 3-year period 1984–86, whereas English had approximately 90% of the total enrolment over the same period (de Garis et al, 1987, p. 14).
[5] Linked also, it is important to add, to a ‘Basic Skills’ emphasis.
[6] For a comprehensive account of the English subjects in the Upper School in Western Australia, as well as in other Australian states at this time, see Nay-Brock (1987).
[7] This attempt, which reached the stage of a draft syllabus outline before being considerably modified as a result of pressure by the private school lobby and others committed to a more traditionalist form of literary study, involved ‘an insistence upon acknowledging a network of relationships between reader, writer, text and context that is unique among comparable senior secondary English literature syllabuses in Australia’ Nay-Brock (1987, p. 108). On the persistence of the literary paradigm in post-Dartmouth English teaching, see Green (1990).
For an indication of the manner in which literacy assessment and testing had become part of the Australian system by the latter part of the 1990s, see Curriculum Perspectives, 18(3), 1998 and Unicorn, 24(2), 1998.

References


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