

# ““The last bastion of democracy”: teachers’ perceptions of the democratic potential of English curriculum”

English Teaching:  
Practice &  
Critique

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Received 29 August 2024  
Revised 4 October 2024  
11 October 2024  
Accepted 11 October 2024

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Faced with increasing systemic constraints and pressures, secondary school English teachers often implement transactional approaches to pedagogy and curriculum aimed at improving student results on external exams, which are then used to rank schools. Despite the pressure to teach this way, teachers acknowledge the power of literature, literacy and language in the English curriculum as vehicles for educating students to be critical readers of texts for a democratic society. As such, the purpose of this paper is to share perspectives of secondary English teachers in relation to the democratic potential of their subject.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a qualitative case study method, this paper shares data from six Australian secondary school English teachers who work in culturally diverse schools. Teachers were interviewed about their perspectives regarding how the Australian English curriculum enabled and/or constrained the teaching of critical and creative thinking in support of a democratic society.

**Findings** – Using Marri’s model of multicultural democratic education, interview data were deductively analyzed to identify elements of the model, including critical pedagogies, disciplinary content and community building. Teachers were concerned that building critical literacy skills was minimized by the system and students’ personal dispositions.

**Originality/value** – The English teachers in this study held a strong belief that the subject of English could emancipate students, although they felt it might be “the last bastion” for a democratic education.

**Keywords** English curriculum, Enablement, Constraint, Democratic education, Critical literacy, Critical thinking, Emancipation

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

I feel like English is the last bastion of democracy, and it’s slowly being eroded by outside forces.  
(Perry)

In education, much research has noted the significant pressures teachers face to “teach to the test” rather than empower students to think creatively and critically (e.g. Appel, 2020; Comber, 2012; Cormack and Comber, 2013). In subjects such as English or the Language Arts, there is capacity to encourage students in high-school settings to read a range of literature and other materials to question and interrogate these texts and their implied meanings (Appleman, 2024).



*Disclosure statement:* The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

*Data availability statement:* The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

English Teaching: Practice &  
Critique  
© Emerald Publishing Limited  
2059-5727  
DOI 10.1108/ETPC-08-2024-0127

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Often, such approaches enable students to consider “new ways” to socially and culturally engage with their peers, families and communities in a democratic society. However, transactional teaching approaches have reportedly constrained English teachers in the development of empowering curriculum approaches (Ryan and Barton, 2014).

Teaching the subject of English in secondary schools is critically important for students’ communication skills, as well as their critical and creative thinking. For example, English teachers use quality literature (Gabrielsen *et al.*, 2019) and nonliterary texts to explore various topics related to social equity (Baker-Bell, 2020), care for others and the environment (Swartz, 2020) and to engage in compassionate and empathetic ways of thinking about challenge and change (Schieble *et al.*, 2020). However, there is pressure on teachers to gain academic results on high-stakes tests, which has influenced the ways in which they teach in classrooms (Avalos *et al.*, 2020; Ryan and Barton, 2020). This is despite the *Australian Curriculum: English’s* rationale for example, stating that the study of English:

Helps create confident communicators, imaginative thinkers and informed citizens [and] plays a key role in the development of reading and literacy skills which help young people develop the knowledge and skills needed for education, training and the workplace. It helps them become ethical, thoughtful, informed and active members of society. In this light, it is clear that the *Australian Curriculum: English* plays an important part in developing the understanding, attitudes and capabilities of those who will take responsibility for Australia’s future. (ACARA, 2024, np)

The Australian Curriculum is a framework that details the cumulative and descriptive learning content and achievement standards from the initial years of formal schooling to the secondary years (Foundation to Year 10). The achievement standards describe the assessable learning content from the curriculum’s content descriptions for each year of schooling. The Australian Curriculum does not outline a systematic pedagogical approach nor prescribed teaching methods for which teachers need to follow for the teaching of the describe learning content. The above rationale highlights the importance of students being confident communicators, imaginative thinkers and informed citizens who are ethical, informed and active members of Australian society (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). However, while the curriculum rationale invokes democratic education through the aim of students becoming “informed citizens,” the challenge for teachers is moving from transactional to more empowering curriculum approaches (Alford, 2021; Carter, 2022; Mills *et al.*, 2022; Riddle *et al.*, 2023).

Further, English teachers in secondary schools are often “called upon” to fix the literacy issues of students across other curriculum areas (O’Sullivan and Goodwyn, 2020). Therefore, the challenge is for English teachers to maintain authentic teaching practices that support democratic and critical thinking despite the systematic erosion of English as a democratic subject by educational systems and government priorities (e.g. Apple *et al.*, 2022; DeJaynes *et al.*, 2020; Gatti *et al.*, 2018). The importance of teaching young people to think critically is more important than ever (Riddle, 2022b). Young people face a future filled with enormous uncertainty and increasing complexity, which is marked by a series of cascading crises (Gardels and Berggruen, 2019; Lipsy, 2020), including rapidly accelerating climate change, increasing inequality and geopolitical conflict. In this context, questions about how education and schooling relate to democracy and the collective struggle to contend with the challenges facing young people are critical for educators to consider (Riddle, 2022a). We are also mindful that:

As long as democracy and education have been considered in tandem, the tensions between realising the potential of democratic action and a commitment to civic participation and the public good have come into conflict with the structures, traditions and curriculum of schooling. (Apple *et al.*, 2022, p. 246)

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We have previously considered the role of English curriculum and pedagogy in building more democratic futures (Riddle *et al.*, 2024) and the ways in which English teachers understand the emancipatory potential of developing their students' critical and creative capacities (Riddle *et al.*, 2024). Here, we seek to examine how critical literacy might support multicultural democratic practices inside and outside of school classrooms. We contend that English teachers have a special place within schools, in that they teach young people both to *read the word* and *read the world* (Freire, 1983), by teaching critical literacy skills that encourage students to question, be skeptical, engage in nuance and deliberative analysis of texts and how they work in the world (Janks, 2013; Williams, 2022). In doing so, English teachers work with the English curriculum to imagine "new possibilities for communities" (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022, p. 377).

This paper reports on data from interviews conducted with six secondary English teachers who work in culturally diverse schools in Australia, which focused on their perspectives on the role of English curriculum and pedagogy in a contemporary democratic society. We were particularly interested in the ways in which the *Australian Curriculum: English* (F–10) strands of Language, Literacy and Literature (ACARA, 2024) enabled and/or constrained teachers in developing the critical and creative capacities of students to explore citizenship and democracy in the English classroom.

The research questions guiding the study were: what are secondary English teachers' perspectives regarding how their work connects to democracy? Also, what enables and/or constrains teachers to undertake this work in the classroom? Engaging with these teachers working in different schooling contexts around Australia, we gained an understanding of the different ways in which the English curriculum can be translated and enacted by teachers.

## Literature review

### *English language arts: an emancipatory subject?*

Across the globe, students, largely in Western countries, learn English with a focus on critical literacy and literature (e.g. see the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (Common Core Standards, 2021) in the USA). We contend that working with literary and nonliterary texts in school English curriculum can help to develop more socially just and democratic modes of education, using "lived textual space as a representational and emancipatory space" (Barnard, 2023, p. 214) with some arguing the generation of a more democratic society (Greene, 1995). Many policies related to the teaching of English point to its ability to be an emancipatory subject, with students being:

Challenged to ask questions that push them to refer back to what they've read [...] [stressing the need for] critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills that are required for success in college, career, and life (Common Core Standards, 2021).

However, much of school curriculum, policies and practices are reported to be designed in ways that actually close down, rather than open up, possibilities for building democratic education communities and the emancipatory practices of critical literacy (Hickey *et al.*, 2022; Marginson, 2006).

A significant amount of research internationally has explored how English teachers can be a powerful force in supporting students' emancipation (Morgan, 2002; Mulcahy, 2010). In fact, scholarly work in the 1960s within literacy education aimed to free students of social oppression and coercion (Freire, 1967). Despite education often being purported as an act of freeing students from societal pressure and poverty (Dewey, 1903; Noddings, 2013), others have noted the perpetuation of educational practices and the systems within which education is enacted as oppressive and contributing to social

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inequities (Apple *et al.*, 2022). For example, in English Language Arts, several literacy researchers have explored more culturally appropriate and decolonizing approaches to improve inclusion and equity and support students' critical literacy skills, including Hogarth's (2020) work in Australia, Pahl and Rowsell's (2020) work on social literacies, and in the USA, Smith's (2023) work on Black immigrant literacies and Compton-Lilly (2002, 2012) research on the literacy practices and school trajectories of lower socioeconomic urban students. To counteract largely colonial and transactional approaches to learning and teaching (Trigos-Carrillo *et al.*, 2021), attention has been given to how teachers might best work together to break this cycle (Hargreaves, 2019).

In a paper on teacher collaboration, Hargreaves (2019) reflected on his career over 30 years working alongside teachers, noting that teachers often "lack both genuine autonomy and also collaborative agreement on professional norms, standards and judgments" (p. 603). Hargreaves argued that breaking down "individualism and isolation" and building more collaborative cultures within schools allows for a more collaborative approach that supports students' development and hence democratic and equitable teaching practices but noted that time was an obstacle. A further study by Zahed-Babelan *et al.* (2019) showed that school leadership was crucial in developing a positive school culture and community. They argued that "the dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and lead one to understand that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin" (p. 140). In this sense, it is leadership teams that need to take responsibility for the type of culture created in a school, including how they might build community.

However, research in school leadership, particularly in Australia and the UK, has shown significant pressures on leaders to perform under the scrutiny of departmental institutions and policy providers (Singh, 2023), especially in low performing schools (Finnigan and Stewart, 2009). How then do schools find ways in which to address the external pressures to "do well" at the same time as educating the "whole child" (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018). Through collaborative and community engagement, teachers can build a democratic approach through leadership, mentoring and advising within their own schools, with other schools in their cluster and beyond. However, Hermanns and Berliner (2021) addressed the challenges associated with democratic education and the need for leaders in schools to create suitable conditions to enact such approaches. They understood the strong need to provide professional development to leadership teams so that the historic failure of education systems can be transformed.

The exploration of citizenship and democracy in English classrooms requires empowered teachers to nurture students' critical and creative capacities. Pedagogical strategies that empower student criticality have evolved from critical literacy approaches to English education. Concerned with the marginalization of critical literacy in educational discourses, Alford *et al.* (2019) argued that critical literacy remains a legitimate knowledge primarily due to teachers' agency in their classroom practices. Therefore, we argue that the importance of democratic education to Australian society requires the consideration of literature concerning the pedagogical practices employed by teachers to nurture students' critical and creative capacities when developing learning experiences dealing with the Language, Literature and Literacy strands of the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2024).

#### *The Australian curriculum: English*

The Language strand of the *Australian Curriculum: English* describes the required learning content concerned with the grammatical knowledge of the English language. Critical grammar approaches focusing on linguistic practices used by teachers were described by Rose and Martin (2012) to support students learning in subject English. The described

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linguistic and pedagogical practices provide a comprehensive approach for educators to draw on to inform their teaching of the Language strand in their educational context (Rose and Martin, 2012). Similarly, linguistic research was reconceptualized by Macken-Horarik *et al.* (2018) to describe linguistically informed subject English pedagogical practices. Other relevant studies that have investigated adolescent citizenship and democracy include research conducted by Humphrey (2013, 2015), who examined the language grammar discourse patterns used by adolescents to build activist and critical stances in academic and civic discourses. Moreover, linguistically informed pedagogical practices targeting social literacy disadvantages in different global education contexts were investigated by Acevedo *et al.* (2023) to illuminate how language grammar approaches can contribute to democratic approaches to education.

The Literature strand of the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2024) concerns students responding to, examining and engaging with different types of literature. Pedagogical approaches for the critical appreciation of literature have been described by McDonald (2023) to support teachers in designing learning experiences for students to respond to, examine and engage with literature in classroom settings. Critical approaches to interrogating literature were taken by Bradford (2007, 2008), revealing how narratives deal with social influences such as globalization, colonization, environmental, communal and diverse identity issues through literature (Johnston, 2019; Thakurta, 2024).

The Literacy strand of the *Australian Curriculum: English* explores students' interpretation and creation of texts for particular social purposes. Literacy pedagogies focus on criticality and draw on Freire's approaches that addressed oppression, critical pedagogies (Luke, 2012, 2018) and critical discourse analysis approaches (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Critical literacy approaches have been advocated by Woods and Comber (2019), who argued literacy education should address social inequalities that enable or constrain literacy interaction and learning; it was argued that literacy involves the interpretation of meaning and the creation of texts concerning relationships with digital and non-digital tools, literature, people and resources in social spaces and times (Woods and Comber, 2019). The critical literacy practices in schools have been examined by Alford (2021), who argued that schools need to have a greater focus on the critical literacy needs of learners of English as an additional language. Teacher agency is essential in nurturing the critical and creative capacities of students when designing learning experiences involving the Language, Literature and Literacy strands of the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2024).

### *Critical literacy and the Australian curriculum*

The Australian Curriculum: English provides opportunities to engage in critical literacy, which is described in the following section:

Through close analysis of texts, students critically analyze the opinions, perspectives and unstated assumptions embedded in texts. They develop critical thinking as they express personal responses and preferences, state and justify their points of view, and respond to the views of others (ACARA, 2024, np).

Since the early 2000s, a critical literacy approach to learning English has influenced curriculum development (Freebody, 2007). According to Freebody (2005) critical literacy is when students question the texts they engage with by interpreting and objectifying the writer's perspective (Gee, 2005). Indeed, Bishop (2023) believed that critical literacy approaches to learning English are a "part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (p. 385) and work toward a more democratic society.

In this paper, we wanted to investigate how the perspectives of English teachers regarding how their curriculum work links to democracy. In doing so, we adopted Marri's (2005) multicultural framework for a democratic education (see Table 1). According to Marri (2005), multicultural democracy refers to and accepts socioeconomic, cultural and political diversity within educational contexts (p. 1037). Marri (2005) argues that two critical questions should be asked when considering multicultural democracy in diverse liberal democratic societies such as Australia. These are: 1. Who is participating in democracy and on whose terms? And 2. How wide is the path to this type of participation? It is important to consider these questions given the diversity of students within Australian schools as while some teachers may believe that English teaching practices have the capacity to improve students' citizenship, these practices may indeed be constraining depending on teachers' beliefs. Regardless, Marri's model aims to help students become critical, creative and active participants in democratic society through the classroom-based multicultural democratic education framework which aligned with the research questions for this study.

### Research design

As researchers in the fields of English curriculum, critical studies and educational sociology, we were interested in what teachers of subject English in the secondary school context felt about the pressures placed upon them to teach to the test and how teaching through this subject might create democratic futures (e.g. Riddle, 2022a, 2022b; Riddle *et al.*, 2024; Ryan and Barton, 2014). We were also aware of the power that teaching English can have to emancipate students as critical and creative learners (Riddle *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, for our study, we asked teachers what they thought the role of English curriculum and pedagogy was in a contemporary democratic society. We were particularly interested in the ways in which the *Australian Curriculum: English* (F–10) strands of Language, Literacy and Literature (ACARA, 2024), enabled and/or constrained teachers in developing the critical and creative capacities of students (meaning how to interrogate and engage with a range of texts) dealing with topics such as citizenship and democracy in the English classroom.

We were interested in the possibilities of teaching as an empowering force in students' lives. As such, we distributed a large-scale survey to English teachers across Queensland, Australia. We received 57 usable responses. Of these, six teachers agreed to a follow-up interview, for which we have used a qualitative case study methodology in which a case is identified as a single entity (Priya, 2021). The interviews aimed to garner further information from the teachers regarding the teaching of English and democratic education (see interview prompts in Appendix). The teacher participants all taught English in secondary schools in

**Table 1.** Marri's (2005) multicultural framework for a democratic education

Critical pedagogy	Multiple and critical perspectives	Thorough disciplinary content and skills
Skills for democratic living	Critical thinking and transformative academic knowledge and skills	Traditional knowledge and skills
	<i>Building of community</i>	
	Positive peer relationships	
	Building understanding	

**Source:** Table courtesy of Marri (2005)

Queensland, Australia. [Table 2](#) shares further demographic information about the participants.

The teacher interviews were identified and treated as a qualitative case study ([Yazan, 2015](#)). [Merriam \(2009\)](#) describes a case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). In this case, the interviews were bound by time and the interview process. The interviews aimed to enlighten views about how disciplinary English might support the development of students’ creative and critical thinking about citizenship and democracy and contribute to democratic education.

The interviews became forms of evidence used to investigate ways in which the *Australian Curriculum: English* (F-10) strands of Language, Literacy and Literature enabled and/or constrained teachers developing the critical and creative capacities of student to explore citizenship and democracy. Using a deductive analytical approach we drew on [Marri’s \(2005\)](#) framework, introduced earlier, for building a multicultural democratic education (see [Table 1](#)) to identify common themes across the data set ([Pearse, 2019](#)). This framework was essential in considering the critical pedagogy and the teaching practices associated with democratic living, as well as disciplinary English content and skills across the three interrelated strands of Language, Literature and Literacy in the *Australian Curriculum: English*. Alongside these three strands, critical thinking through multiple perspectives is encouraged. This analytical approach allowed for wider cultural understanding about the building of community within subject English classroom to be investigated. We used these aspects to unpack the responses from the teachers, which are presented in the following section.

**Table 2.** Teacher participant demographics

Pseudonym	Qualifications	No. of years teaching	Current school (as described by participants)
Anya Female Age 41–50	Graduate diploma of teaching	15–20 years	Large urban government school, Years 7–12, superdiverse population
James Male Age 31–40	Bachelor of education, master of education	10–14 years	Independent urban school, P–12, culturally diverse, affluent population
Perry Male Age 31–40	Bachelor of education, master of TESOL	10–14 years	Large suburban government school, Years 7–12, affluent monocultural population
Simon Male Age 31–40	Bachelor of education, master of education	10–14 years	Urban government school, Years 7–12, superdiverse population
Taylor Female Age 21–30	Bachelor of education	5–9 years	Regional government school, Years 7–12, low socioeconomic population
Lisa Female Age 41–50	Bachelor of education	10–14 years	Regional government school, Years 7–12, low socioeconomic population

**Source:** Authors’ own creation

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Several limitations relate to this project, including the small sample. Even though we received 57 responses to the survey, only six teachers opted to be interviewed. Despite the small sample size, the study provides insights into teachers' perspectives regarding the potential of English as an emancipatory subject, which offers some possible ways to reconsider the use of English curriculum with students in more democratic ways. A further limitation is that we only gathered teachers' perspectives, rather than including students' perspectives in the study. As such, we can only surmise what teachers of English feel regarding the potential of English to empower students as critical and creative thinkers in a democratic society. Our teachers also were not culturally and/or linguistically diverse, with each participant being from an Anglo-Australian and monolingual background; however, each of the teachers we interviewed taught at schools with large English as an Additional Language or Dialect and diverse student populations.

### Findings

After deductively analyzing (Pearse, 2019) the interview transcripts, we found both similarities and differences with Marri's (2005) model of multicultural democratic education. For example, we found that the English teachers spoke about specific aspects related to English as a discipline, including engaging with texts, being playful with language and reading "beyond the word" (Freire, 1983) for students to become critical literate. We also found teachers often spoke about the quality of resources being used in the classroom, including novels, poetry and other forms of literature. They noted the need to use such material to ensure students were engaging with a range of topics and life experiences (Gabrielsen *et al.*, 2019; Gordon, 2012).

Further, teachers spoke at length about effective pedagogies in assisting students with engagement with literature such as novels and poetry. It was clear they felt that students needed to be "taught" how to "read" texts critically and engage in high-level discussion about the issues addressed by authors. Finally, the teachers discussed the importance of knowing students and connecting with them on a deeper level so that creative and critical thinking was enabled. It was heartening to hear the teachers speak passionately about supporting their students as much as possible. However, similar to Alford (2021) – who argued the need for schools to place a greater focus on the critical literacy needs of English as an additional language learners – we found teachers spoke very little about the cultural diversity of their students.

The English teachers we interviewed commented on how they could best support their students to become discerning readers. By this, they meant that it was necessary to teach students how to read critically (Janks, 2013); that is, how we bring our own values and beliefs to different texts and topics (Appleman, 2024). Heggernes (2021) noted the importance of critically reading texts to identify any biases or power relations within the words presented. The teachers highlighted how this can support students' development of intercultural communicative competence which in turn influences creative and critical thinking (Heggernes, 2021). Among our teachers, Anya noted that:

We look [at] representations that are being made and how attitudes, values, and beliefs inform understanding of text. And we talk about, we spent some time at the beginning of the unit talking about how [...] our attitudes, values and beliefs inform the way that we view the world and how we interpret texts and how we then create texts. [W]e had some very interesting conversations around this. (Anya)

Understanding how representations of people, attitudes, values and beliefs are an important part of enabling young people to meaningfully engage with democratic practices through a critical approach to pedagogy. As Marri (2005) argued, for multicultural democracy to be afforded space in the curriculum, it must start with the teacher, who works with students to



critically reconceptualize ideas. However, “for this to occur, the teacher must allow the lives, histories and experiences of diverse socioeconomic and cultural groups, especially those who have been ‘shortchanged,’ to play a critical role in the study of multicultural democracy” (Marri, 2005, p. 1038).

Further, the English teachers believed the selection of texts was crucial to the effective teaching of English. Amy mentioned that texts need to be “accessible,” particularly for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Some of the teachers mentioned that their texts are prescribed so working around this can be an issue:

Well, being able to [think about] place and the people in it. I think it’s really important that kids are literate on that front because that’s what gives them the power to make decisions and look at differing versions of reality. It gives kids the tools to look at their own reality and decide what they want [...] I think that’s the thing that I’m really passionate about. It’s empowering kids to be able to know what’s real and what’s not, and if and when it is real, does it matter? (Taylor)

Teachers also mentioned that there was some difficulty trying to get students to engage in “deep reading” (Gallagher, 2023) to “tackle real-world issues” (Simon). Some noted, however, that some students want to be able to be engaged this way. Caution was expressed, though, over addressing some topics such as mental health as teachers often did not have the expertise to deal with these issues in the curriculum (Simon). Teachers noted that deep thinking was needed when addressing certain issues:

I would struggle to say [the students engage in] deep discussion [...] We do a poetry unit where they write a conversational essay on how poetry can help us tackle real-world issues. It’s very free-form. They get to choose what poetry they want to do, what topic they want to chat about and tackle that sort of stuff. We usually start broad and ask ‘what are our big issues that everyone’s interested in?’ A lot of [the students] tend to do things like mental health. The environment always tends to crop up. You generally have things like racism, that sort of stuff [...] We discuss what the poems are actually saying and how does that relate to what we see in our everyday lives? (Simon)

Teachers acknowledged that oral language, even for older students, was important in their learning as critically literate citizens. Discussion and argument were seen to be essential for students to be able to express their ideas, especially those related to everyday concerns in our world. Despite this importance, teachers did note the difficulty of getting students to deeply engage in discussion about such issues. Marri (2005) argued that community building is essential in the classroom, through which different views and perspectives can be shared, and positive relationships are developed through collaborative approaches to conflict resolution and problem-solving. Having the opportunity to engage in “challenging conversations” in a supportive classroom community provides students with rich opportunities for developing democratic dispositions.

Another notion related to being curious is the idea of quality literature. Many of the teachers shared that it was important that students were engaging with quality literature:

We’re getting to the point where students are having to take ownership and make selections about texts and then prepare an argument. This is where some of those challenges can emerge from, I guess using literature. Or discussions about literature as a springboard for something else that students need to provoke. If they don’t have good, high-quality literature underneath them, then the arguments that they can develop can fall apart. So, we’ve had some students who have asked things like can I bring in this autobiography on somebody that I admire but they probably don’t quite address all of the components we’re aiming for in the unit. So, managing that process of student selection and exposure to [quality texts] is something that we’re looking at. (James)

The notion of “being curious about language” was raised by one teacher (James) and also discussed by others in relation to knowing English as a language rather than just a subject.

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Teachers noted the importance of teaching creatively so that students were excited about working with language and engaged in learning. For example, James said that he tries to:

Make it exciting in the classroom by looking at the origins of words in interesting or novel ways to engage students. To be curious about language, where it comes from, what function it might serve, etc. The other thing that I think we do in my school that makes a difference is trying to talk explicitly about the purpose of the subject of English. You know we spend time in our middle school saying why do we study this (James)

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Throughout the interviews, each of the English teachers commented on the importance of knowing your students and building rapport with them. They felt this was essential in building trust and good relations in the classroom:

I think that's the most important thing about building rapport with children and making good relationships in the classroom [...] students just want to be treated like adults. And when you give them the opportunity for them to feel like their opinion matters and what they have to say is valuable they get confidence out of that. They feel like they can share what they think about real things that are happening to them or happening around them. (Taylor)

The teachers spoke very little about the cultural diversity of their students. Much research has argued for the need for teachers to acknowledge and value cultural diversity in their classrooms by using literature from a broad range of authors (Isro'iyah and Herminingsih, 2023), bilingual or multilingual texts (Dash, 2019) and pedagogies that embrace difference (Abacioglu *et al.*, 2020). For example, in Australia, non-colonizing and Indigenous approaches to teaching democracy have been suggested (Beyer, 2022; Hogarth, 2020).

The disciplinary understanding and skills required to learn the subject of English were discussed widely by the teachers whom we interviewed. This specifically focused on the "power" of English as "the last bastion of democracy" (Simon). In addition to viewing English as a subject that can emancipate students, the teachers acknowledged some challenges regarding being able to cover the curriculum, as well as teach "democratically." Perry and James, for example, shared that the assessable content often got in the way of teaching the way they wanted:

Any time you're actually getting your students to discuss the broader world, you're quite consciously moving away from their assessable content. And so then, you have to quite stridently make the case for that to happen [...] So, you're sort of in that double-bind. There's school expectations, there's assessment, and then there's your ethical mandate to actually do something interesting and to have the students thinking rather than just parroting. (Perry)

What I would love to change is less about the documented curriculum and more about the enacted curriculum. Schools using that permission point now to be more experimental or thoughtful in the construction of assessments that will really connect with authentic experiences, really promote students being reflective or having to respond to a critical argument in some capacity, listening to an alternative viewpoint. (James)

There appeared to be a strong sentiment that English had the potential to develop students' capacity to be critical readers and hence operate well in a troubled world, however, teachers did feel this was becoming less possible due to systemic constraints. As Perry put it, English was the "last bastion for democracy":

I think for the purposes of study in the English classroom, [it] is probably one of the last bastions of the kind of actual discussion on the broader world politics etc. No matter what happens when [students] should be actually having meaningful discussions the assessment narrows almost completely to three essays that they have to complete at the end of the year [...] most schools would be basically just getting kids to drill, memorize facts and be able to write the same essay [over and over] but better. (Perry)

## Conclusion

The case study research data from our interviews showed that English teachers are very passionate about their content area as an emancipatory subject, although they shared the challenges that impacted their capacity to teach using critical literacy approaches. For example, teachers espoused the value of English as an empowering subject but felt trapped by systemic constraints such as mandated assessment regimes in addressing curriculum outcomes. Further, our interviewees showed that they cared a lot about their students and wanted what was best for them. They were considerably cognizant of their students' cultural and linguistic learning needs but also wanted to provide the best opportunities for them to be able to discuss world issues critically and read quality literature.

Despite wanting to teach creatively and through a critical literacy lens, teachers noted some difficulty in getting students motivated but more so, felt the curriculum restricted them in making teaching engaging. They also felt that students needed greater skills in discussing topics deeply as well as selecting high-quality texts to interrogate and learn from. The teachers highlighted the capacity of English to empower their students. They also noted that the prescribed curriculum and assessment practices constrained the extent to which they could enact such approaches. Further, we note that many of the teachers, despite working in culturally diverse schools, rarely discussed integrating students' differing perspectives into their learning. They did mention it was important students understood a range of opinions, as well as able to question and interrogate a variety of texts, but student-driven and centered learning was not a focus of the teacher interviews.

In relation to [Marri's \(2005\)](#) model, our data illustrated how this model might be applied to teachers of English in secondary schooling contexts. While teachers largely discussed critical and multiple perspectives through literature studies, the building of community through reading and writing could be emphasized. In addition, we found that our teachers did not mention culturally responsive pedagogies (e.g. [Ladson-Billings, 1995](#); [Rigney, 2023](#)) nor nuances within their teaching practice, so we recommend teachers consider ways in which to get students to consider English learning from multiple, diverse cultural perspectives.

As such, we believe the critical pedagogy component of the model might consider teaching through quality literature and study of society in building the skills necessary for democratic living. For example, drawing more strongly on the students' own personal experiences in the classroom could provide more opportunities for students to feel heard. Further, including culturally and linguistically diverse texts within the learning is important in considering different perspectives. [Bishop's \(2023\)](#) work highlights the potential for English to be a vehicle for both advocacy and activism.

In this paper, we have considered how six Australian secondary English teachers understood the potential enabling and/or constraining elements of the English curriculum to support the creative and critical literacy capacities of their students for more democratic modalities in and outside of classrooms. It is important that those who research in this field, as well as educational policymakers, leaders and teachers in schools, acknowledge the pressure on teachers due to heavy assessment loads of students as well as the inability to motivate students on occasion to engage deeply with quality literary and nonliterary texts. Ultimately, we argue that English teachers should be given greater autonomy in terms of working with literature, language and literacy in the English curriculum to help young people to become critical and creative participants in democratic communities.

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## Appendix

### Interview prompts

- Introductions, overview of the project: The purpose of this project is to understand the perspectives of Australian primary and secondary English teachers on the role of English curriculum and pedagogy in contemporary democratic society. We are particularly interested in the ways in which the Australian English Curriculum (F–10) strands of Language, Literacy and Literature, enable and constrain teachers in developing the critical and creative capacities of students in the English classroom.
- Consider direct responses to survey and opportunities for extending on their responses.
- Can you give an example of a time where you were working with literature in your English classroom, through which your students engaged in critical inquiry together? For example, working with challenging, contested or complex topics, which allowed them to demonstrate critical thinking in the classroom?
- How do you support and extend learners, particularly some of the more reluctant or disengaged students, to think creatively and critically in your classroom? Can you give an example of an English lesson that was particularly effective in connecting with students?
- We often talk about how it's important for young people to be literate to fully participate in society. What does this mean for you and how do you support your students to develop their literacy and language learning?
- Can you think of a time where you were challenged as a teacher by the curriculum content, texts or classroom discussion, in terms of working with difficult issues with your students? What did you do?



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- Could you please share what you see as the major constraints and enablers of the English curriculum to support young people to be critical, creative thinkers who can engage fully in society and lead fulfilling lives?
  - If you could change one thing about English curriculum, what would it be and why?
  - Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences as an English teacher and how your work connects to ideas about democracy, citizenship, creativity and critical thinking?

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Thank you for your time today.

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