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AARE blog, Alison Bedford, English curriculum, University of Southern Queensland (USQ)

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# Toil and trouble: why time-poor teachers choose these texts today

By Alison Bedford

When Queensland introduced a prescribed text list in 2019, teachers had a smorgasbord of choice, but they went with the bread and butter options.

New data from the Queensland Curriculum And Assessment Authority about the texts shows English teachers play it safe when it comes to the texts they teach in Units 3 and 4 (Year 12).

A major system overhaul in 2019 increased external quality assurance measures; introduced externally designed, unseen examinations; and placed a limitation of text choice for teachers.

But this sort of [syllabus reform reduces teachers' sense of self-efficacy and agency](#) as well as increasing the stakes for each assessment. That [has a trickle down impact on younger year levels](#).

[Research at the time](#) revealed a great deal of anxiety among teachers. While this was an opportunity to reinvigorate their practice, [a lack of time given to support the transition](#) seems to

have stymied this reinvigoration; teachers' text selection choices are shaped by a range of pressures, and so the canon is the surefire solution.

Schools are given a [choice of eight texts for the External Assessment](#). Of the 508 Queensland schools offering the General English syllabus, 347 of them (68%) select *Macbeth*, and the next nearest text, with 68 schools, is another Shakespearean work, *Hamlet*, meaning over 80% of schools select a Shakespearean play. The three Australian authors on the list for the External Examination (Hannah Kent, Andrew McGahan and Tara June Winch) are studied by less than 50 schools collectively (9%).

The big numbers for the three internal assessments are also strongly canonical: *The Great Gatsby* dominates the list of novels, with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, George Orwell's *1984* and Tim Winton's *The Turning* the only other text to have greater than 50 schools using them. The list of poets is the most balanced, but still leans canonical, with Dawe, Duffy, Frost, Plath and Owen topping 100 schools each.

The [QCAA advice regarding text selection](#) requires:

There must be a range and balance in the texts ... Courses should include texts from different times, places and cultures, including texts that aim to develop in all students an awareness of, interest in, and respect for the literary traditions and expressions of other nations in the Asia-Pacific region. Australian texts, including texts by Aboriginal writers and/or Torres Strait Islander writers, must be included across the course of study and within each unit pair of the course. At least one of the Australian texts studied over the four units of the course must be by an Aboriginal writer or Torres Strait Islander writer. Schools may include texts translated from other languages.

Yet the data clearly suggests that while text selections may meet the technical requirements of the syllabus, they do not take up the spirit of inclusion and diversity suggested by the QCAA. This [disconnect between aims and reality is well established](#), as Shakespeare, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century dystopia and well-known poetry are safe-havens, which don't require the development of new resources, or the teaching of contentious issues in a fraught political climate.

It is important to note that the data about text selection focuses on Units 3 and 4, but it is Unit 2 that has a unit focus on Australian texts, so this is where it is most likely to encounter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-authored works. While schools are not bound by the prescribed list in Units 1 and 2 (Year 11), a number of forces work to push teachers towards 'sticking to the list'. [Queensland has a textbook hire scheme](#), in which schools provide textbooks to students at a substantial discount. These texts are returned and reused the following year, which means that schools cannot change the set texts regularly, and that class sets of texts become a resource that can be swapped between year levels or between schools, perpetuating the original text choice. These systemic forces are not unique, and while [they vary from state to state](#), they have the same effect of narrowing text choices.

The other key and most pressing impetus for text selection is resourcing: if teachers choose a text no one else is doing, they have to start from scratch in terms of developing the teaching materials. Online teacher forums and Facebook groups are filled with requests for resources and teaching ideas, as time poor teachers look to work as efficiently as they can. The other advantage of homogenous text selection is safety in numbers. In preparing students for an unseen examination, having a resource-rich professional community teaching the same text offers teachers security that they are preparing their students well.

As Head of English and Languages at The Glennie School in Toowoomba, Emily Scott, explains, text choice is in part constrained by a school's existing resources. Complying with the syllabus requirements across the 4 units is akin to "a jigsaw puzzle. Building upon students' prior knowledge, development of skills, and varying genre types are key factors to consider when

selecting texts". Further, Scott suggests teachers also have to consider "school culture, and the interests and needs of your students when choosing texts from the prescribed text list. What may work for one school may not necessarily be best placed in another context".

This focus on supporting learners in their contexts is reiterated by Cate Park-Ballay, Head of Faculty- English at St Hilda's School on the Gold Coast:

we find ourselves in an educational landscape where we are no longer perceived as the 'sage on the stage.' Instead, we actively promote an environment that empowers student agency. Our goal is to extend learning beyond the traditional classroom boundaries, selecting texts that not only facilitate independent student exploration but also provide easy access to excellent resources shared by knowledgeable colleagues worldwide.


Both of these reflections from experienced curriculum leaders highlight the many competing pressures and priorities at play in designing a course of study and making suitable text selections. The time and workload pressures placed upon teachers mean there is an increasing gulf between "being the kind of teacher they want to be, and the type of teacher they have time to be". This time poverty means teaching the dominant text, with the extensive resources available through professional networks, is the logical choice. With an onslaught of systemic processes like textbook hire, a high stakes testing environment and workload demands working against teacher agency and creativity, it is little wonder that we retreat behind the canon, [perpetuating a more monocultural narrative with reduced teacher autonomy](#). As a result of curriculum and systemic pressures, have we lost sight of the joy of reading?



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## 2 thoughts on “Toil and trouble: why time-poor teachers choose these texts today”



**Dianne H**

February 8, 2024 at 8:01 am

A family member who is a secondary teacher told me recently that her school no longer even bothers with set novels, because they know that the students simply won't read them – so they have movies to watch instead.

Mind you I remember some of my fellow Year 12 students waaay back in 1984 who never read “Great Expectations” either – because the ABC had conveniently programmed a new BBC series and many of the students (mostly the boys) in my class watched that instead of reading the book!

As for the final comment “have we lost sight of the joy of reading?” – surely it is too late to worry about that by year 11 and 12? By then you are well and truly either reader or not. Encouraging the joy of reading and enjoying books needs to happen long before school starts. As a Primary teacher my aim was always to build a love of reading and books, so that children will be in bed, with a torch or begging to have a light on for a bit longer – because they just HAVE to finish the book/final chapter! But instead, I found that more often than not, the type of school “home readers”; the way that reading is taught; and the number of schools that no longer have school librarians; and the number of class teachers who no longer read to their students but instead show a video of someone reading a book; results in many young children finding reading “a chore to be endured”. No wonder they do not want to read the unrelatable texts set in high school.



**Alison**

February 8, 2024 at 8:38 am

It's a real challenge Dianne, and you are right that a love of reading should be encouraged from a young age. No matter which texts teachers select there will always be students who don't enjoy that particular book, and the systemic and workload pressures further narrow the range of texts teachers go to. I am surprised to hear a school has removed novels as I think most senior curricula still require them. Thanks for taking the time to share your experiences.

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