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# The Dance and the Tune: A Storied Exploration of the Teaching of Stories

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## ABSTRACT

This paper tells a story of one student teacher's experiences as she considers the choice of fiction texts studied by young secondary learners of English, and how those texts are taught.

Based on a series of interviews carried out in the South-West of England and Wales, the narrative provides a perspective on the limitations of current curricula offered by schools that feel bound by a restrictive assessment and inspection regime. It concludes that such curricula can stifle effective teaching and learning, and so teacher educators have a duty to provide new entrants to the profession with a range of perspectives, opportunities and experiences. Through so doing, we promote the fictionalisation of data as a valid, robust approach to educational research.

## KEYWORDS

English curriculum; Key Stage 3; fiction; knowledge; connoisseurship; teacher agency

## Introduction: setting the scene

This paper tells a story within a story about our research into the teaching of stories, inspired by a UKLA-funded research project undertaken by the authors – seven secondary English Initial Teacher Education (ITE) lecturers, all based in the South-West of England and South Wales. The initial aims of the project, as reported elsewhere (Kneen 2020; Smith 2020) were to explore a) which prose, poetry and drama texts are commonly taught in English lessons at Key Stage 3 (KS3<sup>1</sup>) and b) how they are taught, in order to promote professional insight into and reflection upon the impact of teachers' literature choices for KS3 learners. The research consisted of online questionnaires completed by 175 schools across England and Wales, followed by 9 semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of respondents.

Although the choice of literature taught at KS3 is, in theory, down to English teachers – Shakespeare being the only writer prescribed by the national curriculum (DfE 2014) – the homogeneous nature of texts taught was striking, with male, white authors and protagonists dominating text choices (e.g. Boyne, Sachar, Morpurgo, Dickens). This led us further to think about *why* these texts particular are taught, and so to consider not only

their impact upon learners at KS3, but their teachers, and novice teachers in particular; and it is this that is the focus of the current paper.

The research interests of the lead authors include curriculum policy, pedagogy, creativity and the aesthetic. Accordingly, the paper is offered as a vehicle that demonstrates our interests and our values. It has an unconventional structure: it begins with a co-written narrative, followed by a discussion of both our approach and findings. It concludes with some suggestions for research, policy and practice.

## The dance and the tune

Staff room. Lunchtime. Teachers are scattered like discarded books; some piled amiably around the kettle, swapping mugs, teabags, banter. Flat light trickles in from large, square windows; smoky-damp clouds hang still.

A young woman sits apart, upright, her hands fiddling with her lanyard, watching. She is spotted quickly by the smart woman who has just entered and who walks briskly over, extending her hand with a smile.

‘You must be Thea. Pleased to meet you,’ she says, folding herself neatly into the spare seat next to her. ‘How’s your morning been?’

‘Great!’ Thea’s face betrays a touch of panic. ‘Err, Ms. Short?’

‘God, yes, sorry! Call me Sophie. But, yes, I’m the Head of English here – welcome to the department.’ Sophie regards Thea more closely. ‘Probably a bit overwhelming, right? We’ve all been there: the PGCE is a tough year. Although, that’s probably not the best thing to say on your first day. So, how did you find the lessons this morning?’

Thea gulps. How best to answer? In truth she had felt, well, discomforted by the four different-but-same English lessons she had observed, sitting quietly at the back making notes on the PowerPoint print-outs that each teacher – presumably instructed by Sophie – had provided. It wasn’t that she didn’t love being in the classroom, seeing the teachers at work, chatting to the pupils when she had the chance, but something felt . . . awry somehow. She is relieved when they are interrupted before she has a chance to answer.

‘Hi!’ A woman drops unceremoniously into the seat next to Sophie, ‘Alright?’ She pulls a banana out of her bag, begins to peel it back. Thea recognises her as one of the teachers she’d observed earlier – Year 9, *Macbeth* – and smiles back at her.

‘Lola, isn’t it?’ she asks, and Lola nods, grinning.

‘And you’re Thea.’ They shake hands warmly. ‘Great to see you: I’ll be your mentor.’

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Wednesday, a few weeks later, in Lola’s classroom. The windows frame tree-tops, bare and spindly, bending double in the wind. Thea watches the last pupil shuffle out of the classroom then drops her head to the teacher’s desk, feeling the sticky plastic on her flat forehead, and sighs. Lola, already moving towards her from the back, scooping up books and worksheets as she goes, smiles, ‘Come on, Thea, it wasn’t that bad!’

‘Ugh.’ Thea responds and lifts her head, letting her cheek slump into her hand. She smiles back at her mentor gamely, but she can feel hot pinpricks behind her eyes. She looks down and blinks them back.

‘Ok. Let’s have a debrief now – it’s lunch, there’s time’.

The kindness in Lola's voice undoes Thea and she crumples into a sob. It takes all her strength to fight her tears but she does, gripping the edge of the desk.

'Thea,' Lola breathes, hand on her back, 'come on.' She draws up a chair and sits close to her.

'Come on,' she repeats, 'let's start with the positives: you know there were some'.

Thea shakes her head. The tears are still coming but she realises now that she's not upset or hurt; she's frustrated. She wants to inspire this class but she's not getting to the kids in the way that she knows she can. Since the moment she decided to teach, she'd imagined the lessons she might lead, the literature she might introduce to her pupils: the poets, dramatists, and authors who inspired her growing up; her current favourites – Bernadine Evaristo, Amanda Gorman. Her classroom today, full of fidgety kids with smirks or glazed eyes, was horrifyingly distant from her dream. But the problem, she suddenly realises, is not their behaviour – that is merely a symptom.

She looks directly at Lola, calmer: 'Why do we have to teach *A Christmas Carol* in Year 7? I've not got anything against it – it's a fantastic book – but it's not working for this lot.'

Lola sighs. 'Yeah, well, we weren't that keen either. It was a MAT<sup>2</sup> decision – all schools in their chain have to teach the same texts.' She pauses. 'How else are you going to ensure consistency?'

'Is that the most important thing?'

Lola shrugs. 'It's good that all pupils are getting the same offer. "Cultural capital" – the kids here really need it'.

'I feel like we're putting them off for life.'

Before Lola can answer, the door flies open and Sophie cranes in. 'Coming to the staffroom?' she asks, brightly; and then, 'You two ok?'

Lola smiles, 'Just a bit of a tricky lesson with 7TY'.

Sophie raises her eyebrows and steps in, 'Oh dear. Anything I can help with?'

Lola catches Thea's eye, nods encouragingly. Thea takes a deep breath.

'I just feel that I couldn't get them into it, couldn't get them interested. Even though I'd spent ages preparing that lesson. I had to resort to telling them that it would help them in their GCSEs<sup>3</sup> – but that seemed more like a threat than a promise.'

'I get that we need to begin to prepare them for the exams.' Thea hesitates, flushes, and looks up at the ceiling to avoid seeing Lola and Sophie's expressions. 'But I don't get how starting a GCSE text now is going to help. It feels like asking someone to go at 70 down the motorway on their first driving lesson, or ... or ...' – she fishes around for another analogy – 'asking a trainee cook to prepare a banquet. Just a bit – in at the deep end,' she concludes, lamely.

'I know what you mean. It's a challenging text,' Lola answers, carefully. 'But by not teaching it, we're in danger of patronising them. As if it's beyond them.'

'Totally!' Sophie agrees. 'We need these kids to aim high! They know this is a tough text – so, by doing it with them now, we're showing them that we think that they're up to it!'

Thea had a momentary vision of Sophie as a Nike-clad sports coach, yelling at her team from the touchline, 'You guys can do this!' She wondered if the words were more intimidating than encouraging. But necessary, maybe, to spur them on?

‘Yeah, I get that,’ Thea answered, slowly. ‘I want that too. I’m just not sure that they do. Or how I am going to get that across to Mo and Ali. They weren’t exactly . . . appreciative. Perhaps I’m just not good enough at it. Yet.’

‘That’s it! Chin up!’ Sophie grinned, ‘You’ll get there with practice. And don’t forget that there’s loads on *A Christmas Carol* on the system – that’ll save you spending hours planning. Ok, I’m off to grab lunch before Catch Up Club. Later!’

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Weeks pass. Thea settles. Lola helps her to understand a wider range of classroom management strategies and, by December, Thea has more-or-less won compliance. Lola and Thea feel lucky: Thea in her mentor, Lola in her mentee. They begin to see each other as friends. But the issue of *A Christmas Carol* remains and, sitting in the local after a long day, close to the fire and far from the heavy sky and bitter winds outside, it pops up again:

‘It’s just that I don’t feel I’m teaching Dickens, if I’m honest’ says Thea. ‘I spend more time talking about PEE<sup>4</sup> than Scrooge.’

Lola laughs, ‘That’s just the way of things.’

Thea rolls her eyes. Lola considers, ‘Alright, what would you teach them about *A Christmas Carol* if you could decide?’

Thea hesitates. She’s tempted to reel off what she wants to do – explore how Dickens writes amazing episodes that end on cliff-hangers and get her class to do the same! Help them invent names that paint a picture of each character! Show them how Dickens wears his social conscience on his sleeve! But she answers simply, ‘How would I know? I’m just a newbie. What would *you* teach Y7 about Dickens?’

Lola is suddenly serious. ‘I’ve haven’t thought about that for ages. Since starting at this school, no-one has ever asked what I’d like to teach them. All my performance management targets are to do with them making progress. Now, Ofsted is all about curriculum – but we still have to get results. We’ve got to show we’re teaching the canon as well as nailing the grades.’

Lola and Thea knock their glasses in a mock toast and drink, silent for a moment. Thea contemplates the fire, feeling the comfort and the wonder of the flames weaving their boundless patterns: the primal, immediate connection to humanity across time.

‘I’m not totally convinced I would choose *A Christmas Carol* for Y7 if it was down to me,’ she says, ‘And I’m not saying we shouldn’t challenge them. I just think we need to make it relevant to them too.’

Lola rolls her eyes, ‘Oh God, don’t tell me you want to get them writing *A Christmas Carol* raps or . . .’

‘Ah, no,’ Thea interrupts, ‘That’s not what I mean – although I don’t think there’s anything inherently wrong with that. But imagine if we weren’t thinking about exams so much! Especially when they’re only in Y7 – the specs could change completely before they get to Y11!’

Lola shrugs, ‘True. But what would be the point in teaching any literature, by that token?’

Thea nods slowly, ‘Maybe the point is just the experience. Surely, if we can help them to experience the text – enjoy it, explore it, reflect on it – the rest will follow. What was it David Holbrook said?’

Lola looks blank.

‘Something about a lively and rich context being the best way to develop in English. You know, teachers creating that context for pupils’.

Lola laughs, ‘Spot the PGCE student.’

Thea raises a questioning eyebrow.

Lola looks at her sympathetically, ‘It’s just not reality. If you can’t measure it, it doesn’t count.’

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‘It’s been great having you on the team, Thea,’ says Sophie, rather formally, as they stand squeezed together in the corner near the pigeon-holes, struggling to eat rapidly-crumbling mince pies. Thea smiles awkwardly, slightly discomfited by the noise of excitable end-of-term conversation pressing around them. Sophie grabs one of the disposable cups of wine being circulated and asks: ‘So, how have you found it, overall?’

Not for the first time, Thea finds herself in a quandary. She plumps, now, for candour.

‘It hasn’t been everything I’d hoped it would be, if I’m honest,’ she says softly.

Sophie’s eyes, which had been tracking the wine, snap back immediately to Thea’s face.

‘Sorry?’ she asks.

Thea gulps but masters her panic. ‘I’ve loved being in class. But I’ve been so disheartened by what we’re doing – trying to hothouse them through. They’ve been bored; I’ve been bored.’

Sophie’s face, Thea thinks, would be funny if this weren’t so serious. But there’s no going back now.

‘A *Christmas Carol* in Y7. *Macbeth* in Y9. Quizzes at the start of every lesson and PEE paragraphs at the end. But they can’t use a 10/10 quiz result to help them write that paragraph. Where’s the “pupil progress” there?’

Thea’s cheeks burn; she drops her glance. Sophie’s face, on the other hand, is stone. She raises her chin a fraction to respond.

‘We go beyond pupil progress. We give our students knowledge they’ll have for the rest of their lives. No apologies if it’s hard to teach: we’re giving them a rigorous curriculum.’ She half smiles, “Tough love, if you like.

‘These kids come to us with huge gaps. And yet they leave with results above the national average. This year’s results were the best in the MAT.’ Sophie’s eyes shine; her satisfied face says, ‘case concluded’.

Inside Thea, retorts and arguments pelt in crazy circles but she can’t catch one of them, can’t make them stop. She feels – as do her course-mates, as do generations of English teachers – that English moves with its students: there is no definitive answer to Dickens; there is no great bank of static knowledge to pass on; English is a celebration of language, of culture and cultures past and present; it is remade in each generation; we pass on the process, not the outcome; English teachers help pupils to read carefully and respond thoughtfully or they risk missing the point entirely.

The point, she suddenly thinks, bringing the whirl of thoughts to a sudden halt. That’s it! The point.

She looks at Sophie, who has now fallen into merry chat with one of the deputy heads and realises that, to Sophie, the point begins and ends with exam results and Ofsted inspections. There is nothing else. Thea realises she had assumed that all teachers saw exam results as part of their job – the part on which they were scrutinised, for sure – but

still only part. Now she sees, with astonishing clarity, that this just isn't the case; not for all teachers anyway, not for Sophie.

Thea turns away. She scans the room to find Lola, eventually spotting her squeezed into the corner by the kitchenette.

'Lola!' Thea pants.

'Hi!' grins Lola in greeting. 'What a relief, eh?'

Thea nods and laughs. 'End of term is a marvellous thing!' sings Lola, 'Makes everything worthwhile! You going back to your Dad's for the hols?'

'Yeah . . . well, no. Maybe,' flusters Thea. 'Listen, Lola, can I ask you something?'

Lola nods, and Thea ploughs on quickly, 'Is the whole point of teaching just exam results?'

Lola guffaws, raising her hand to contain a mouthful of wine.

Thea laughs along, but adds, 'I mean it – I've only just realised.'

Lola cackles, 'What do you think you've been doing these past couple of months?' Then, seeing Thea's face, falls silent.

Thea looks sober. 'Seriously, Lo, doesn't it bother you? If we focus only on results, we lose so much. I feel really sorry for the kids. I had expected to feel jealous, if anything – all that youth and future – but, honestly, it's so joyless. And many are . . . isolated by the texts we teach them.'

Lola shrugs. 'We're not here to give them a good time.'

'You're not kidding – no wonder they're not choosing English A level.'

'Listen, Thea, I think you're brilliant – you're going to be a great teacher . . .'

Thea smiles, 'But?'

'But,' Lola agrees pointedly, 'you don't know what it's like when you've got a full timetable, meetings after work, parents' evenings, emails, directives from SLT<sup>5</sup> to cram something into your next lesson at a moment's notice, Ofsted hovering. And the marking! You've only been teaching, what, 10 hours a week?'

Thea nods reluctantly.

Lola's face sets. 'Then you don't know. Come back when you're on full timetable and then tell me if you're worrying whether the kids like the text or not.'

The bitterness in Lola's tone humbles Thea. She murmurs, 'It's not only that; it's like we're not teaching English, just "English exam prep".'

'Well,' says Lola, 'that's how it is. Do you want to explain to parents why their little darlings haven't got their target grade? Or defend poor results to the governors when you're a HoD<sup>6</sup>? Like I say, come back when you're in that position and we can worry about the lack of performance poetry on the syllabus then.'

Thea is silent. She grabs a cup of wine and takes a gulp. Catching Lola's eye, she feigns a smile. 'Alright, I understand. I'll shut up now'.

Lola grins back and they both drink. 'Right, tell me what's going on with going home for Christmas.'

Thea groans, 'I need another drink before I can explain. Pub?'

Lola reaches for her coat. 'Really need to ask? C'mon . . .'

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Later, packing for the journey, Thea replays Lola's words. She knows Lola is right, in a way, about the hard realities. Perhaps she should accept it – just teach what she's told. Isn't that a weight off?

Still ... still ... Thea imagines a lifetime of teaching PEE paragraphs rather than poetry, of comparative connectives instead of stories. She knows she can't do it. No matter what, she says to herself, cramming socks into a corner of her case, rather more forcefully than necessary, I will remember why I'm a teacher. My students will experience, interpret – enjoy! – all sorts of literature; they will form strong opinions; they will share ideas with each other; they will grow! Lola's face looms in front of her, eyebrows raised. Thea slams her case shut and smiles defiantly back. She locks the door of her student bedroom, flicks on the hall lights, and starts off down the corridor, dismissing the ghosts of her past and thinking of her future students. 'God bless Us, Every One!'

## The case for fictionalising the data

Our decision to present our data as fiction – as a story – was grounded in our epistemological position as researchers. We accept that narratives are a valuable way of developing knowledge and understanding (Bruner 2002), correspondent with the kind of 'truth' that can be found in literature (Frank 2000; Greene 2005; Brinkman 2009). Fiction is a 'lie that helps us see the truth' (Rolfe 2002, 89). In fact, it is possible to argue that this 'lie', the process of creating fiction from data, is no greater a 'twist' than using the more conventional language of 'knowledge-discovery' which is neutral, scientific, and 'clean' (Clough 2002: all research omits, prioritises and selects according to the human consciousness driving it (Clough, 1999, 2002; Eisner 2003). Taking into account Stronach and MacLure's powerful warning that, 'the writer is never more present in the text than when she seems to be absent ... The appearance of artlessness is a rather artful business' (1998, 55), we have opted for an openly 'artful' approach because we wish to declare our presence and own our priorities and omissions.

In developing our 'artful' approach to research, we have taken inspiration from Eisner's assertion that 'the arts might be used in some productive way to help us understand more imaginatively and more emotionally problems and practices that warrant attention in our schools' (2005, 10). For Eisner, art can achieve this through attention to the particular which, in turn, illuminates the general: 'Is Shakespeare's portrayal of Lady Macbeth simply about a particular Scottish noblewoman who lived in the latter part of the 11th century? Hardly' (p. 7). In fact, the vivid portrayal of this one woman has generated centuries of careful reading and debate, the result of which is more profound knowledge and understanding of the human condition. Fiction can have real, sustainable impact. Perhaps this is partly because writers of fiction and social scientists are not so very different: they test ideas against evidence; they generalise; they pose questions about the social world; and they try to remain faithful to details of external experience (Caine et al. 2017). However, fiction writers, in using language that is 'heightened' aesthetically and emotionally, can find arresting ways to communicate with an audience that must also go some way to explain the impact of stories over time (Clough, 1999; Frank 2000; Clough 2002; Hannula 2003).

Given fiction's potential for extending our understanding of fundamental human pursuits, it seems to us that it is a particularly valid form of educational research. We share Clough's (2002) scepticism about the sterility of accepted research methods in education and accept that, in fact, 'the major source of data emanates from how the investigator experiences what it is he or she attends to' (Eisner 2003, 9). This is

particularly important to us as the research team's collective and extensive experience in English teaching makes this project, to some extent, 'backyard research', which Kim (2016, 247) describes as research into an aspect of a researcher's own daily life, including professional life. We wish openly to acknowledge the influence this has on our interpretation of the data. Further, the trope of a story underlines our interest in the humane: a story involves the *coming together* of people, a sharing of understandings, that we hold to be at the heart of English.

## Composing our story

Eisner's work not only validates our decision to write a story, but our approach to the writing itself. His notion of 'connoisseurship' (2013 in Marshall and Gibbons 2015, 199) brings to the fore the idea that engaging with expert criticism from multiple perspectives is a means of deepening understanding of the work of art under discussion. Following Marshall and Gibbons (*ibid*), we suggest that our decades of combined classroom and ITE experience makes us 'connoisseurs' of English teaching; we drew on this experience as we sought to be 'receptive perceiver[s]' (2015, 201) of the interview data.

Our readings of the transcripts saw the texts in dialectical conversation with each other as well as with us, and 'hotspots' (MacLure 2013, 661) emerged that helped us to understand synergies between them. It was then a creative leap to combine these findings with our professional experiences to create a narrative through which the interview data, individual 'event[s] of truth' (Gadamer 1975/2004, 484) read through our connoisseur eyes, are woven into a single 'event'. By creating this conscious interplay between data and professional experience, we were doing 'rich justice at the same time to [our] "subjects" as to [ourselves] as the organising consciousness' (Clough 2002, 17). We passed the manuscript between us, developing it and commenting on each other's additions. Creating the story allowed for reconfirmation of our understandings through the very process of shaping the writing (Jessop and Penny 1999).

The resulting presentation of Sophie, Lola and Thea interacts with the central theme of the story – the influence of KS4 examinations on the teaching of literature at KS3 (and the resulting impact on teachers at all stages). This theme was generated by the data, which unequivocally speaks of the bearing of national examinations on text choices for all year groups, even the youngest: *A Christmas Carol*, a GCSE set text, is the ninth most popular text read in Year 7 (Smith 2020). The choice of this text highlights the irony that Dickens would himself have been critical of the enforced inclusion of his work in a prescriptive, Gradgrindian, 'Facts'-based (1854: n.p.) curriculum.

The voices in the data evidence a range of responses across the various schools, some making concerted efforts to resist what is, in effect, GCSE preparation in Year 7 ('Some of the texts we've chosen actually purposefully don't go towards the GCSE'); some, pragmatic ('I think everybody understands that the tail is wagging the dog to a certain extent with preparing them for the GCSE'); some seemingly driven by the goal of good results ('There's a grab for grades, your students need to be in a position where they are able to go for the same grades as everybody else').

Sophie's character was inspired by the latter: motivated by securing good results for her department, she has embraced the content and rationale of the inspection framework against which she will be judged and uncritically adopted a knowledge-based view of

learning as promulgated by Hirsch (1983) and Young and Lambert (2014), Young and Muller (2016), signalled by her use of the lexicon, e.g. 'cultural capital'. Lola is warm and supportive, but her pragmatism is a source of tension between herself and her mentee, Thea. Through Thea, Lola has moments of realisation that her own perspectives have been narrowed by the system she finds herself in but she, nevertheless, remains committed to a kind of realism: 'this is the way it is'. Only through great personal effort will Thea not become Lola, an important idea in the story which reflects our interpretation of the data as well as research on teacher resistance and compliance (see Ball 2003; Gibbons 2016).

The ending of our tale is deliberately ambiguous. While Thea leaves the darkest days of December behind her – implicitly rejecting the confines of her first placement school – and heads into the 'light' of the new year, a new placement school, and the opportunity to make more agentic choices in her future practice, we realise that her optimism will not necessarily play out. However, it was a deliberate choice to suggest that there is room for hope: we hold that the purpose of our research is 'not just research in what is the case, but research in how to make what is the case more like what ought to be the case' (Wilson 1972, 7), and that any good research has a political purpose to bring about change (Clough and Nutbrown 2012). Here, we hope we are harnessing the power of story to present research in a way that is inspiring, provocative and potentially transformative.

Indeed, Thea's name reflects our hopeful stance: it is an alternative form of Theia, goddess of light; alternatively, Elethea means 'truth'. Sophie means 'wisdom', used perhaps with knowing irony in our story, but nonetheless emphasising that Sophie's practice is borne of her own lived experiences and training. Lola is the diminutive of Dolores, 'sorrow', appropriate for her character's apparent loss of perspective and agency. We made other conscious choices in our writing, too, to shape both its aesthetic qualities and its message. For example, the trees outside Lola's classroom are spindly, bare, reflecting the starkness of her situation; literature is likened to a fire whose warmth and energy has kept alive past generations; the use of the present tense provides immediacy and urgency to emphasise our belief that these issues are live and pressing. The title, too, is an oblique reference to *A Christmas Carol* and also to the phrase 'to dance to someone's tune', which has clear links to our central theme. The reader will decide whether this is Thea's fate.

We invited our fellow researchers (also connoisseurs) to reflect on the first draft of the story. One noted, 'The experience of reading it engages emotions, *then* activates critical thinking, which is the opposite of traditional articles which present all of the theoretical, contextual information first, setting up a false objectivity.' Another confirmed that it 'absolutely rings true', even for the Welsh context in which she is based where there are no MATS and no explicit emphasis on 'knowledge' or cultural capital. Their suggestions were invaluable in the development of final draft, further reinforcing the idea that the story is sufficiently truth-bearing.

## Concluding thoughts

There are several key 'truths' exposed through the 'lie' (Rolfe 2002, 89) of our story which we hope are self-evident but are nonetheless worthwhile emphasising here. One is that the confines of the current curriculum could be frustrating for trainee teachers as well as

pupils. As mentioned above, the foregrounding of white, male authors and protagonists in current text choices sounds a jarring note in the context of #Metoo and the Black Lives Matter movement. We include Mo and Ali in our story, recognising the ‘very limited options’ (Sundorph 2020, 4) to celebrate diversity in the curriculum (Smith 2020). When examination success is the deciding factor in the choice of literature studied, such limitations are an (unintended?) consequence: we hope that our story joins the voices raising this issue.

Secondly, we wish to re-direct the professional conversation around English teaching back towards the discipline’s hermeneutic foundations, which, as Eaglestone (2020) demonstrates, are a requirement of the Programmes of Study: English should develop pupils ‘emotionally, socially and spiritually’ (DfE 2014, 2). The influences of Hirsch (1983), Young and Lambert (2014), Young and Muller (2016) and ‘neuro-education’ (Perry et al. 2021, 3) have resulted in pedagogical ‘distortions’ (Eaglestone, 2020, n.p) that profoundly impact on the way literature is experienced by young people. As Thea points out, retrieval practice is of limited use for pupils who are attempting to craft a convincing analysis of a text. Yet, retrieval practice is one of a range of strategies, based on cognitive science, being strongly pushed in all classrooms, endorsed by and mandated through official frameworks such as Ofsted’s inspection framework (Ofsted 2019) and the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Education (DfE 2019). Attempting to shoehorn cognitive science principles to our subject through such ‘curricularisation’ (Smith forthcoming) reveals a ‘profound philosophical mistake about the nature of knowledge’ in English (Eaglestone, 2020, 5) and so constitutes a real challenge for English teachers who, as specialists, are confident in their understanding of English as an interpretive hermeneutic activity, but who are now under pressure to submit to pedagogical practices better suited to scientific knowledge.

Consequently, we suggest that ITE professionals (both university tutors and those embedded in schools) have a moral imperative to ensure that trainees are provided with a range of experiences and possibilities when it comes to shaping and teaching the English curriculum at Key Stage 3. In the drive to extend the curriculum beyond ‘teaching to the test’ (Ofsted 2019), it is crucial that new teachers are sufficiently confident to dance in their *own* style, adapted to the needs of young learners of all abilities and backgrounds, and are ready to keep dancing when the music changes. We have suggested that English is a subject that moves with its students: it moves with its teachers too. This will require positive involvement from middle and senior leaders in school.

Finally, we would like to conclude by suggesting that fictionalising data is a valuable research method. We have shaped the findings from our research into an aesthetic product through rigorous and robust means and yet the outcome remains open enough to allow readers to find their own interpretations. In this respect, the product is thought-provoking rather than conclusive, which is a defining characteristic of art. We believe this acknowledges the complexity of the issues explored and is, therefore, a meaningful contribution to educational research. Most importantly, we believe that this is a way of drawing attention to the nature of English itself: English generates knowledge through interpretive activity and we ask this of our readers here as they create valid meaning and meanings. Such knowledge is part of the contribution of English to the whole curriculum and to the rounded experience of all pupils. It is our

fervent belief that this kind of knowledge, and this kind of learning, deserves respect. We appeal to the English teaching community to find their own way of advocating for it.

## Notes

1. Key Stage 3 represents school years 7–9, for learners aged 11–14.
2. Multi-Academy Trust.
3. General Certificate of Secondary Education (usually taken by 16-yr olds in England and Wales).
4. Point, Evidence, Explain – a mnemonic used to support writing structured paragraphs.
5. Senior Leadership Team.
6. Head of Department.

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