

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this doctoral research is to analyse the 1999 NSW HSC English syllabus through the lens of its reception and implementation, to produce an account of the theoretical changes that are embedded in the syllabus documents and the impact that these changes had on selected stakeholders. The findings made about the 1999 HSC English syllabus are discussed in relation to Hunter's genealogy of the functions of schooling (1993), to explore the desired purposes of schooling reflected in both the English curriculum, and in stakeholder's attitudes. Using grounded theory methods in a qualitative approach to exploring the experiences of teachers at two schools through interview and observation data, as well as an analysis of the reactions represented in the public through newspaper publications from 1995-2005, core categories of experience and concern are identified relating to the implementation of the mainstream mandatory courses in English for the HSC. These core categories are used as a basis for a content analysis of key extracts of the English syllabus, with the finding that curriculum changes such as the inclusion of visual texts and language modes constituted an important theoretical shift in the content and objectives of English as a school subject. Also, while some challenges faced by stakeholders are seen to arise from problematic constructions of English in the syllabus itself, other tensions can be seen to be based on the particular demands of the local school contexts, and intensified by pressure from largely negative newspaper portrayals of English teachers and curriculum.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

*“A syllabus is **not** a media release. Teaching English is **not** a simple process”*

*(J. Reid, 2005, p.64)*

The tendency for those not involved directly in English classrooms to reduce the goals and content of the curriculum to a study of ‘books’ and ‘basics’ can be frustrating to those working in the field of English teaching. As stated in the quote above, teaching English is **not** a simple process, and research to date has provided valuable insight into the significant philosophical shifts that have occurred in the subject in just over a century of policy and practice, and how these are reflected in previous syllabus documents. The topic of this research is the Higher School Certificate (HSC) English syllabus in New South Wales (NSW), Australia that was published in 1999, and the focus of this investigation is the nature of the change in English in the NSW context. The specific purpose of this research is to analyse the questions: “What are the innovations, challenges or problems that have shaped the construction and implementation of the syllabus?” and “What is the nature and extent of the theoretical shift in the underlying philosophies of the subject?”

The findings of this study are significant to current theoretical understandings of English curriculum, as considerable changes to the senior secondary English curriculum reflected in the 1999 syllabus have received limited research attention, despite attracting much attention from journalists and politicians. The impact of important theoretical positions such as critical literacy and multiliteracies are explored here, and the extent to which the 1999 HSC syllabus adopts these positions is ascertained by framing the analysis of the syllabus with findings

about the beliefs and experiences of teachers, as well as about the portrayal of English in the media. This choice of methodology is significant, as the identification of the views of professional and public stakeholders enables a contextualised study of the syllabus document that takes into account the lived reality of the curriculum. The implications for professional practice and policy formation are particularly timely, given the current development of an Australian Curriculum for English that is due for implementation across the country in 2012.

In summary, this research agenda aims to make a contribution to the field of English education by providing a deeper understanding of the constructions and lived realities of English teaching. My purpose is to illuminate the interrelatedness of the historical, cultural, political, technological and ideological nature of teaching by identifying the sources of and exploring the grounds for resistance to innovation and change in the English curriculum.

In the next chapter of this thesis, a background is provided to the study including an overview of influential English curriculum philosophies and the territory that is most frequently contested in the contemporary context. The influence of the canon, as well as multiliteracies and critical literacy will be explored, as well as the relationship between ‘English’ and ‘literacy’, the effect of the postmodern turn in literary theory, and the examination and assessment of English. An outline of different conceptualisations of the purpose of schooling and the ideal student is also provided, most notably of Hunter’s (1993) genealogy of the functions of schooling, in order to place historical understandings of English curriculum within the context of broader ideologies in education.

Chapter 3 consists of a review of the research literature pertaining directly to 1999 HSC English. This includes survey data collected in 2002 by Manuel and also by the English Teachers’ Association, which indicated teachers’ satisfaction with the content, philosophy and structure of the syllabus, as well as its initial implementation and examination. Along

with this, O'Sullivan's (2005) research into English teachers' experiences of curriculum change provides insight into the importance of listening to teachers' voices and considering how teachers construct their professional identities in order for curriculum change to be successfully adopted.

The choice in this thesis to combine research on the experience of teachers with research on the reception of the syllabus in the public domain is explained in Chapter 4, along with the key research questions and research framework devised for this study. By analysing material about HSC English represented through newspaper coverage as well as teacher observation and interview data using a grounded theory approach, the core substantive concerns of each group can be identified and explored without restricting the analysis to a pre-determined theoretical framework. By exploring newspaper representations and teacher experience, this research sets out to consider the nature of curriculum change represented in the 1999 HSC English syllabus through the lens of the lived experience of the syllabus, and the importance of adopting a social constructivist approach in considering the syllabus as a 'preactive' stage of the shared and negotiated classroom experience is made clear in this chapter.

Chapter 5 is the first of three chapters in this thesis containing analysis of the data collected. In Chapter 5 the representations of HSC English made in newspaper articles from 1995-2005 are analysed using grounded theory methods to locate key themes rather than imposing an existing theoretical framework. After locating initial themes and examining more closely the dramatic increase in newspaper coverage in 2005 the core concerns represented in the media are identified, and these are used later in the study to reflect on the contents of the syllabus document.

In Chapter 6 the data collected from case studies in two Sydney metropolitan schools is analysed, again using grounded theory methods to locate initial themes in both schools before

constructing core categories that identify the factors that place pressure on implementation of the syllabus in the school context. While limiting the study of teachers' understanding and practice to two schools restricts the extent to which the experiences of these teachers can be viewed as typical of NSW English teachers generally, the interview and observation data collected in both schools over two school terms enables analysis in this chapter to drill deep into the lived reality of the syllabus and explore the challenges faced in the context of day-to-day school life.

Chapter 7 consists of a content analysis of key extracts from the 1999 HSC English syllabus that are selected based on the core concerns and pressures identified in the newspaper and case study data using the method of theoretical sampling. By using the perspectives of stakeholders as a lens to explore the syllabus, the innovations and changes contained within it can be viewed in relation to challenges observed in its implementation. In this chapter the introductory section of the syllabus, as well as selection of the Standard and Advanced English courses and information about assessment and examination are interrogated to ascertain possible sources of tension in the syllabus that problematise the realisation of its aims. This also enables a test of the validity of the concerns of stakeholders in terms of the 'evidence' provided in the syllabus about the nature and scope of theoretical changes.

Finally, in Chapter 8 conclusions are drawn about the innovation and change represented in the 1999 NSW HSC English syllabus, as well as the challenges and problems that had an impact on its implementation. The implications of these findings for research methodology, curriculum theory, professional practice and policy are also discussed, and directions for future research are suggested based on the findings and limitations of this study.