

Audience and purpose: Secondary English teachers and the social vision in *The New Zealand Curriculum*

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Abstract

The New Zealand Curriculum expresses a vision for young people who are contributing and participating members of society. While this social vision is supported by the inclusion of key competencies, the curriculum document says little about content and its role in developing this participatory agency. This article uses interview data with secondary English teachers to identify prevailing constructions of subject English and to consider the extent to which these constructions may foster the curriculum's vision for actively engaged people. I suggest that a close examination of teachers' constructions warrants attention against the stated aims in our curriculum. I also argue that enacting the curriculum's social vision is neither simple nor straightforward owing to the broader context in which secondary English takes place.

Introduction: A social vision and an educated ideal

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) (NZC) constructs the ideally educated young person as one who is “actively involved” in civic life (p. 8). Words such as *connected*, *actively involved*, *community engagement*, *innovation*, *inquiry*, *curiosity*, *participating and contributing* feature prominently and repeatedly in the opening pages of the document. This participatory impetus is also present in the document's description of the English learning area. Subject English is couched in terms of empowerment and active participation: “by engaging with text-based activities, students become increasingly skilled and sophisticated speakers and listeners, writers, and readers, presenters and viewers” (NZC, p. 18). As students develop their skills it is expected that English will allow them to “critically interrogate texts in order to understand the power of language to enrich and shape their own and others' lives” (NZC, p. 18). The aim is to ensure that students will “participate

fully in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of New Zealand and the wider world” (p. 18). As outlined in the document, participation includes the ability to think critically and in an in-depth manner, to make appropriate language choices and to know how texts work in a range of contexts.

Despite this ideologically weighty mission, *NZC* says little about the type of curriculum content that fosters this social vision. Levels of progression are organised around achievement outcomes rather than prescribed content, meaning that teachers have relative freedom to design their English programmes. A key feature of the document is its emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness to student context. Framed as a guide rather than “a detailed map” (p. 37), *NZC* allows schools and teachers to determine curriculum content. In relation to secondary English in New Zealand, Locke et al. (2009) argue that our curriculum document offers insufficient direction in terms of what content should be taught. Indeed, the description of the English learning area is outlined on a single page. Further, given the emphatic vision espoused in the document, there seems little discussion about *which* forms of content are most likely to realise this vision (Rozas Gómez, 2011).

Secondary English and the social vision in *NZC*

Meanings about subject English are multiple and contested (Marshall, 2013; Medway, 2005; Yates et al., 2019). So much so, the scholar Peter Medway said the “name English for a curriculum area is exceptionally uninformative and fails to indicate anything significant about the subject” (Medway, 2005, p. 20). These points of contestation include what counts as knowledge within the subject, the nature of English teaching, what English teachers need to know, the aims and purposes of the subject, as well as what its distinct qualities may be (Ireland et al., 2017).

Yet subject English is not entirely amorphous, and its meanings are not completely up for grabs. English is always constrained by curriculum norms and practices, which means that in any given moment, some versions of secondary English are more likely than others. Policies such as *NZC*, and the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA)¹ for example, construct the nature and purposes of subject English in specific ways. One aspect shared by both policy frameworks is flexibility for schools and teachers to design courses and assessment opportunities. This flexibility is premised on the

idea that greater engagement, participation, and successful education outcomes are possible when content is designed around students' needs and interests.

How teachers construct subject English, therefore, is important for both conceptual and policy-implementation reasons. At a conceptual level, multiple discursive landscapes produce subject English, and teachers negotiate a range of constructions, including points of tension between competing aims and ideals. In terms of policy implementation, it is important to consider which versions of English are likely to promote the vision expressed in NZC. This exploration is particularly important given the flexibility teachers have to decide curriculum content. As Ireland et al. (2017) show, teachers' beliefs play an important role in giving shape to curriculum ideals. In this sense, teachers' constructions represent a range of discourses about the aims and ideals of the subject that directly shape the ways in which secondary English is enacted in New Zealand classrooms.

Mapping subject English

To unpack subject English in *NZC*, I make use of Locke's (2007) English map to consider the different emphases and aims of the subject, including those which may sit in tension with each other. The map also offers a conceptual basis from which teachers construct their subject. Locke details four possible ways of categorising these different emphases: *cultural heritage*, *personal growth*, *textual competence*, and *critical practice*. These categorisations do not presume that teachers' constructions emerge tidily or solely from a single emphasis; rather it is assumed that teachers "operate out of a set of assumptions that are discursively constructed and complex both in nature and in origin" (Locke, 2007). This map is outlined below:

Cultural heritage: This construction views English as a traditional body of literature (Locke, 2007) and is associated with notions of a canon and the "best literature" produced. In this view, literature is a privileged form of meaning. Therefore, the emphasis in this approach is on acculturation and on seeing students as readers, rather than producers, of literary work. Learning to closely read for meaning becomes a central focus of English teaching, which, Locke argues, explains why writing and oral language were historically much less valued than reading.

Personal growth: Locke suggests this construction is consistent with a progressive model of learning where both canonical and popular texts are valued. While literature continues to play an important role, the emphasis is on students as meaning-makers with the focus shifting to readers' experience of texts. Within this construction, the literary text and the reader share a dialogical space where meaning is negotiated and produced. In placing the reader at the centre of this transaction, classrooms become interactive spaces, and teachers take on a guidance role, leading the way for shared understanding.

Textual competence: This view emphasises the importance of mastering textual skills in a broad range of genres and texts. Associated with genre theory, the focus of study is on how texts are produced. Students work towards becoming astute meaning-makers who can learn to make intentional language choices in purposeful and powerful ways. Locke argues that at its weakest conception, textual competence is reduced to a set of disconnected skills, where, the focus is on developing competence in a range of decontextualised measurable skills. This includes the decontextualized use of literature, which serves only as a basis for demonstrating particular conventions.

Critical practice: Connected to notions of critical literacy, this depiction of English emphasises the location of texts within broader power relations in society. The purpose of subject English is to enable students to identify the interests and ideologies embedded in texts and to understand how they may produce particular versions of reality. In this sense, close reading is concerned with uncovering meanings that are connected to wider power relations in society. A critical-practice approach highlights the political nuances of both content and the choices teachers make.

Mapped against Locke's four possible English models, the English learning area resonates with all four emphases to varying degrees. The description of the place (and pleasure) of literature, for example, suggests a cultural heritage view of the subject:

The study, use, and enjoyment of the English language and its literature, communicated orally, and visually, and in writing for a range of purposes and audiences and in a variety of language forms. (NZC, p. 18)

Critical practice is evident in the subject's emphasis on interrogation of texts, and textual competence surfaces in the subject's focus on creating texts using

appropriate and effective text conventions. The strongest alignment, however, is with personal growth (Locke, 2007). *The Curriculum Guide: Senior Secondary (English)* (Ministry of Education, 2012) for example, focuses on identity as a central concept in English and emphasises the importance of choosing texts that students will find interesting. As Yates et al. (2019) point out, literature becomes a means through which self or cultural knowledge might be achieved rather than literature as a category of its own.

The personal growth aspect of subject English is further cemented in the curriculum's pedagogical stance, which affirms student-centred and co-constructivist approaches to learning. Under the "Effective Pedagogy" section (*NZC*, p. 34), for example, the curriculum emphasises learning conversations and learning partnerships between students and teachers. While subject English is framed by broader persuasions and mandates that emphasise student agency and voice, it can be argued that all four models outlined by Locke (2007) have the potential to foster the vision expressed in *NZC*.

While the focus of this article is on subject English and the social vision expressed in *NZC*, the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) further shape English content in the senior school (the last 3 years of secondary school). The NCEA is a standards-based assessment framework in which students must demonstrate competence against specific learning outcomes (Hipkins, Johnson, & Sheehan, 2016). These small, compartmentalised units of curriculum assessment, known as standards, can be assessed either internally in schools or externally as national assessments (Locke, 2002). The standards are designed to be flexible and include students who have been previously excluded by a norm-referenced system or are disengaged from schooling (Hipkins et al., 2016). Imbued with the task of providing a seamless progression through assessment, NCEA actively promotes the assembling of specific standards into specific courses to meet the needs of specific students. This feature has been critiqued for its fragmentation of knowledge, its eroding of English as a discipline, and its impact on teachers themselves (Locke, 2002, 2007, 2008). These critiques signal a tension between being responsive to students' learning needs and catering to personal interest at the expense of the discipline.

The study

This article is part of a wider research project exploring how English teachers make decisions about content and assessment opportunities for different groups of students. Specifically, the study is focused on equity outcomes in relation to differentiated access to content. Interview data was collected with approval from the University of Auckland Ethics Committee. For the purposes of this article, the data is used to consider teachers' constructions of subject English. The study made use of qualitative data obtained through semistructured interviews with ten heads of departments across ten schools in Auckland, New Zealand. Heads of departments were chosen because of their experience and responsibility for setting the curriculum direction of their departments. Schools were invited to participate and then selected in order to have a range of deciles² represented. At each interview, teachers were asked questions about the sorts of curriculum choices they made in relation to student need and the ways in which they might target courses for particular sorts of students. Questions about their understanding of the purposes of subject English were open-ended, while other questions sought specific information about text and assessment choices and what teachers took into account when they made those choices. A second set of questions sought to explore the sorts of tensions and competing demands that teachers may experience. A summary of the school sample is in Table 1.

Table 1. A breakdown of the teachers and schools involved in the study

Head of Department	School Context	School Decile
Teacher A (Susan)*	An integrated Catholic school	10
Teacher B (Filipo)	A coeducational state school	1
Teacher C (Rachael)	A coeducational state school	2
Teacher D (Mary)	A coeducational state school	9
Teacher E (Eseta)	A coeducational state school	1
Teacher F (Rob)	A coeducational state school	8
Teacher G (Helen)	A single-sex girls' state school	3
Teacher H (James)	A coeducational state school	1
Teacher I (Mike)	A coeducational state school	2
Teacher J (Rose)	A coeducational state school	4

* All teacher names are pseudonyms.

I used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify teachers' constructions of subject English and to consider the types of meanings they give to subject English. Initially, interview transcripts were read to look for prevailing constructions. On a second reading, I looked for possible points of tension between these constructions, particularly where constructions may be in tension with broader school or assessment imperatives. My analysis and interpretation of the data also employs a social constructionist lens in which meanings and experience are socially produced and historically situated (Burr, 2015). A social constructionist lens allows a consideration of the meanings that circulate about subject English as a function of this specific discursive moment (Fairclough, 1992). An approach that focuses on the contextually bound nature of discourses problematises the context rather than individual teachers or schools.

Teachers' constructions of subject English

In keeping with the curriculum's inclinations towards personal growth, the teachers' constructions similarly tended to align with this model. However, there were also nuances and tensions to these constructions that merit closer attention. While the data suggest that the teacher participants hold a progressive and personal growth view of English, their constructions gravitated towards the following three ways of thinking about their subject: English as narrative knowledge, English as validating student voice, and English as cultural capital.

Prevailing constructions

i) English as narrative knowledge

The idea that narrative is an integral part of English and that it constitutes worthwhile knowledge was a strong and consistent theme. The place of narrative was tied closely to the personal-growth model of English with its emphasis on the learner and on experience. As one teacher put it: English is about "being able to experience things" and while qualifications were important, subject English should be "about creating the whole person with a good understanding of themselves and of the world that they're living in." Teachers generally suggested one of the purposes of English was to provide stories that were relatable and were able to advance our understanding of the human condition. In this sense, narrative was seen as a way to reflect our own

stories back to us. Another teacher, for example, stated that the essence of English is “stories we can relate to”. The importance of “relatable” stories was underscored by the belief that stories transcend social and historical boundaries by dealing with a universal humanity. For example, Mike (Teacher, Decile 2) notes that students “can learn things about the human condition. They can learn things about themselves, they can learn about their community.”

The value of stories emerged as a repeated theme, so I asked the teachers what it was specifically about narrative that contributed to students’ personal development. The responses to this question were consistently tied to the value of exploring the lives of others and the ways in which this contributes to both self-understanding and a broader understanding of humanity. Teachers noted the importance of fostering a shared sense of experience with others, and one teacher noted that it is not always about being culturally responsive, but rather that good literature “speaks to everyone”.

I always talk to my students about Shakespeare and say to them you know this is a guy who lived 500 years ago. He’s a middle-aged white guy. Why are we reading his stories? He lived on the other side of the world! Why? Because they are stories we can relate to, no matter what culture or time period you live in. There’s jealousy, there’s love, there’s forgiveness. (Filipo, Teacher, Decile 1)

[Othello] is as relevant now, as it ever was because it’s a play that reflects our anxieties. It’s a basic human right to be able to make sense of the world around you. (Rob, Teacher, Decile 8)

It’s studying human nature and what makes us do the things we do. I’m here in New Zealand and students can still relate to someone growing up in the 1400s. I mean it just gives them a sense that all humans, we go through the same thing and we go through the same struggles. (James, Teacher, Decile 1)

What’s the point of writing if it’s not to express our feelings and to react to things and to understand how other people have written...and to understand what they mean. (Mary, Teacher, Decile 9)

ii) English as developing and validating student voice

This theme was closely tied to notions of agency and emphasised the role English plays in developing students as a confident meaning-makers. This more therapeutic aspect came through strongly in teachers’ talk. Through validating

students' voices, teachers felt that confidence and self-efficacy would follow. The development of a confident student voice meant that teachers also emphasised the importance of initiating students into textual practices and conventions to maximise students' ability to use and produce a wide variety of texts. Mike, for example, draws attention to the importance of valuing student voice while at the same time showing how to best express that voice: "Students are being challenged to engage more in developing their own ideas...it is paragraph writing and its developing ideas sequentially...confidence is so important, confidence in his or her own self-efficacy."

Similarly, Rose (Teacher, Decile 4) saw a link between developing textual competency and developing confidence: "Some kids do have the thinking skills but they don't have the writing skills [English] gives them a chance to say 'yes, actually, my ideas are worth something', they've been validated." While, Eseta (Teacher, Decile 1) reasoned that although not all kids are going to be professional writers, literature is still worth learning because "if we teach kids to communicate their ideas and their feelings accurately, with passion and with feeling, then we've done a good job."

iii) English as cultural capital

Teachers saw their subject as providing access to cultural capital, including content that extended students beyond their lived experiences. Bourdieu (2005) defines cultural capital as the assemblage of values, tastes, clothing, entertainment, ways of speaking and engaging with others that are connected to an individual's social class. Bourdieu used the concept to examine how schools may reproduce social-class relations. Teachers suggested that English played an important role in opening a window to broader knowledge and experiences, which students might not otherwise experience in their own communities: "That's what literature does. It transports you to other places that you have never experienced." (James)

In this view, subject English has the potential to play a role in challenging existing ideas so that students would be able to "think beyond where they are" (Rose). Seen as "rich cultural capital", one teacher was surprised to find that while she thought "kids in South Auckland want to read about their own world" they were actually keen to "read about other worlds" (Rachael, Teacher,

decile 2). This was underscored by the often-seen reality in low-decile schools where students had far fewer opportunities to travel, even beyond certain parts of Auckland.

A lot of young people we work with here don't have much life experience outside of South Auckland and they don't have many friends who are from different cultures, who speak differently. How do you expose them to those other vernaculars? (Filipo, Teacher, Decile 1)

Teachers also argued that certain types of English content developed complex cognitive capacities more than practical types of English curriculum. The literary essay, for example, was identified by a number of teachers as a form of writing that developed thinking skills in sophisticated ways. James notes that the ability to sustain and develop an idea in an essay promotes higher order thinking because students have to learn to analyse and then to structure ideas in cogent and coherent ways. He connects this to an advantage beyond school: "If you are able to articulate your ideas and express your opinion in a coherent, intelligent way, you give yourself an advantage." He then further connects this advantage to the hopes of many Pacific parents who wish to see their children go to universities rather than go to work in factories.

Similarly, teachers felt that subject English played an important role in the development of critical thought that was necessary for overall school success: "If you can't think beyond the text, question things, it's going to make it hard in every subject" (Susan, Teacher, Decile 10). Mary similarly talked about the importance of students understanding that "not everything you read is true [and so] having some level of analysis and critiquing" is an important part of developing the criticality required for participating in informed ways.

Finally, teachers suggested that extending students beyond their immediate realities and developing complex ways of thinking, contributed to participating in society in powerful ways. Susan, for example, discussed the importance of engaging with media distinguishing between "what's fact and what's opinion". In preparing students for a variety of settings, teachers saw some of the greatest potential to empower students to move confidently and powerfully in the world. Susan notes that subtle changes to language in different settings and that students "need to be able to communicate with different types of people in different contexts once they leave here." Or, as Filipo notes:

It helps with understanding others, exposing you to different perspectives, different backgrounds, experiences and feelings, they're going to be working with people, under people, living next to people who are different than them. (Filipo)

Subject English as cultural capital surfaced as an important theme about the nature and purpose of subject English. Access to certain form of curriculum content was not only valuable in terms of simply accessing other ways of being, but in affording more powerful and agentic ways of positioning oneself in society.

Competing missions and possible tensions

The presence of more than one construction operating in a given context suggests that teachers always negotiate a range of discourses (Levine-Rasky, 1998). Ireland et al. (2017) note that teachers often work towards coherence between their own personal commitments and their classroom practice. In their study, teachers sought to find congruence between diverse literary theories and their own epistemological beliefs about subject English. A focus on tension also highlights the competing aims and ideals between policy imperatives, school goals, and teachers' own commitments. Teachers' constructions are always located in a broader setting that is equally contested and unresolved. Therefore awareness of, and attention to, tension offers important insights to how teachers enact subject English. Given this article's concern with the type of content that may foster the vision in our curriculum document, it was important to consider the tensions that mediate curriculum content choices in secondary English classrooms.

Focusing on tension, therefore, is helpful because it exposes the unstable space between curriculum policy and teacher practice, where both possibility and constraint operate in unsteady ways. Levine-Rasky (1998) maintains it is not the presence of tension in teachers' talk that should be of concern, but its absence. That is to say, it is the articulation of tension that demonstrates awareness and critical understanding of this complex curriculum context.

To this end, I explore some tensions present in teacher constructions of subject English. For secondary English teachers, some of these tensions emerge from both curriculum and assessment structures that may themselves have competing

aims and ideals. The data in the study suggest the most prevailing tension is the tension between English as disciplinary study and English as performative. Within this tension it is possible to identify two related tensions:

- i) The tension between providing a broad curriculum to all students and differentiating content in order to meet individual needs.
- ii) The tension between achieving credits in the short term and the thinking and skill needed for success in English in the future, including access to important forms of cultural capital that allows students to participate in society in a critical manner.

Teachers' constructions of subject English were often constrained by the demands of assessment and the need to deliver measurable achievement outcomes. Rachael, for example, notes her department's courses were about "making a course to meet the needs of the students" and that it was the "achievability" of the assessments that sometimes drove the design of the course so that when "no one got that standard" was there "there any point in doing it?"

English as qualification rose as a significant demand that sat in tension with constructions like English as narrative knowledge. Despite her commitment to the broader purposes of subject English, Eseta notes, "our **main aim** was to get every student in Year 11 the Level 1 literacy credits, **particularly those who are struggling**" (my emphasis). Credits and minimal qualification were pressing drivers and often meant this became the primary focus in classrooms. Mary, for example, talked about the qualification focus as "jumping through hoops" and getting students credits "by hook or by crook." This is not to say that teachers were unaware of the problems this drive to get the credits could create. They acknowledged this drive resulted in "not teaching the subject" (Mary) and that while striving for minimal credits was a worthy intention it was also "ultimately short-sighted and not up-skilling our students in the actual things they needed to prepare themselves for the following years." (Eseta).

The following two excerpts provide a rich illustration of the tension between competing aims, in this case between content and qualifications.

If we look at our results over the last five years, we have doubled the amount of kids who have got their literacy and who have got their Level One Certificate here. And the way we have done it is by looking at the marking criteria and then scaffolding it backwards to get [students] through and we have done that

unashamedly so that our kids could pass. It was a really good intention, but I think we're getting to a point now where, basically by breaking things down so easily for them, we have gone as far as we can go, and the kids have as well because what we're not teaching is understanding. And we've done the same at Level Two which is good, but at Level Three we suddenly expect them to critically analyse and that's a huge skill and you've got to have interpretation and you've got to have discussion skills and you've got to be able to have an opinion and justify it and we're still hitting that brick wall because we're not teaching that. (James)

That's back to reflective practice to keep coming back and saying, yes, we want to pass the assessment but how do we keep ourselves keeping on thinking about why we're actually doing this. But you get that kid asking those questions and you catch yourself shutting them down and go 'yeah I don't want to do that, I don't want to be that sort of teacher, but I'm doing it anyway because we need to be true to what I plan for this lesson'. We want everyone in the class to achieve but it is in total tension with the bigger stuff. (Rose)

Both teachers discuss the ways in which the drive to produce outcomes for students shapes what they do in the classroom. James draws attention to the ways in which getting students through results via scaffolding and breaking down content so that it serves the limited and finite function of a credit in an achievement standard. Rose talks about the way in which "passing the assessment" sits "in total tension with the bigger stuff" so that sometimes more complex forms of learning may be shut down. The tension between broader subject aims and assessment is profound, and shapes content and what happens in classrooms in significant ways. Neither Mike nor Rose attempt to offer a resolved or singular account of their experiences. Instead, they provide an astute articulation of the challenges they face between being faithful to the purposes of their subject and the exigencies of producing achievement results.

Discussion: Teachers' constructions of subject English and the social vision in *NZC*

As Locke et al. (2009) state, secondary English teachers operate from a range of discursive constructions about subject English. As such, teachers' constructions contain a number of tensions they need to negotiate. The teachers in this study tended to align with a personal-growth model of English, with a focus

on narrative knowledge, student voice, and cultural capital. The alignment to personal growth is not surprising given that a personal growth model of English is consistent with the aims of *NZC* and *NCEA*, particularly with their emphasis on curriculum flexibility and student-centred approaches to learning.

In exploring the relationship between the social vision espoused in the curriculum and secondary English, the teachers' responses suggest that there are both possibilities and constraints in relation to the vision. The value of English as narrative knowledge was a strong theme, and the ways in which teachers talked about narrative knowledge is suggestive of the orientation towards people and society the social vision expects. For example, teachers made references to the humanising value of narrative and how learning about others (even distant others) can help students develop understanding about their own communities. In keeping with the curriculum's participatory impetus, teachers also saw subject English as providing important opportunities to develop their student voice. This aspect of subject English was clearly framed in terms of developing confidence and in coming to see one's ideas as valid and worthy of being shared. Finally, teachers' sense that subject English provides students with cultural capital, was also clearly framed in terms of access and participation in settings beyond the students' immediate communities.

The interview data also suggest, however, that English is *performative*, where curriculum content becomes subject to outcomes and standards in an equally dominant way. Consequently, this drive to achieve outcomes can lead to a minimum standard approach to shaping how teachers choose content (Sadler, 2007). This particular tension for teachers signals some of the demands that may impede the realisation of the aims and ideals expressed in *NZC*. Rose, for example, notes that her department wants students to "open their minds" and "to explore" but that "in order for them to learn what they need to know to pass, you've actually got to shut down some of their critical thinking... [and] say, 'stop asking those questions.'"

These competing demands suggest that giving life to the vision expressed in our curriculum is nuanced in the context of secondary English content. First, it may be that curriculum and assessment flexibility may impede the type of content that develops a more critical participatory agency. In as much as teachers and students have the option of bypassing certain content, not all students may encounter English as narrative knowledge, for example. Similarly, the place of

narrative knowledge through literature and poetry can also become displaced by assessment and the desire for (short-term) achievement outcomes. This displacement not only has the effect of diminishing the space for literary study but also prevents the acquisition and development of more sophisticated ways of engaging with English. Ironically, this includes the potential to access important forms of cultural capital and the ability to use language in powerful ways in senior years—something that teachers identified as an important affordance in subject English.

Given *NZC*'s commitment to active participation in society and its positioning of English as enabling students to “deconstruct and critically interrogate texts” (*NZC*, p. 18) it was surprising not to find a stronger articulation of critical practice beyond notions of cultural capital. Critical literacies, for example were largely absent in the data. One possible reason for this absence may be the dominance of the personal-growth model and what Goodwyn (2017) describes as its recent iteration as personal interest rather than social agency. Goodwyn's argument is compelling in the context of *NZC*; both the student-centred emphasis and the corresponding content flexibility reinforce and *enable* the role of personal interest in the design of English programmes.

In contrast, Goodwyn refers to a Deweyan version of agency in which individuals come to see themselves as members of a broader social group. This distinction is critical and suggests an interrogation of the ways in which the curriculum document frames participation in individualised ways. The key competencies, for example, tend to construct students as needing to become the right kind of *individuals*: positive in own identity, motivated and reliable, resourceful, enterprising, entrepreneurial, and resilient. As stated earlier, the *Senior curriculum guide for English* (Ministry of Education, 2012) stresses identity and personal interest as key foci for teacher planning. The point of Goodwyn's argument is that the development of social agency requires us to take the role of language and literature seriously. The teachers in this study articulated a strong sense of the value of literature in promoting critical awareness and in turning students towards the world. Reorienting students' to a sense of themselves in relation to the world may be one way in which subject English realises the vision (both in the curriculum and learning area) for critical participation in society.

Concluding comments

The data from the study reveal some insights to a pressing question about the relationship between subject English and the educated ideal expressed in *NZC*. The identified themes and tensions suggest that the interplay between policy and practice is complex and that enacting the vision expressed in the curriculum is not straightforward in secondary English classrooms. Secondary English is not bound to a single policy about its aims and ideals, including our curriculum, nor is it tied solely to how individual teachers conceptualise the subject. In which case, if subject English is to activate the vision for critically involved and participating citizens, further discussion is needed on the type of curriculum content that will enable this ideal.

Note

- 1 The National Certificates of Educational Achievement is the national qualification in New Zealand secondary schools. This qualification is undertaken in the last 3 years of secondary school (Years 11, 12 and 13).
- 2 Schools in New Zealand are categorised by deciles according to the socio-economic status of the surrounding community. A decile 10 school reflects a high socioeconomic status and a decile 1 school reflects a low socioeconomic status.

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