Dividing practices: Senior English and social inequality in New South Wales

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Abstract

The role and significance of schooling in maintaining and renewing social disadvantage is particularly evident in upper secondary education, and especially so in the high-stakes final examination at the end of Year 12. This paper focuses on Senior English in this context, with specific regard to the Australian state of New South Wales. Building on a recent study of the outcomes of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in 2017, it analyses what the data reveal about the relationship between Senior English and social inequality in this instance. It does so with reference to a brief account of the history of English teaching and senior secondary curriculum policy in New South Wales and also, comparatively, a now well-established comprehensive study of senior secondary schooling in Victoria. It concludes with some implications of this account for further investigations of Senior English and subject English more generally, as well as of the social meaning of senior secondary education in Australia, in particular with regard to the nexus between curriculum and assessment, knowledge, and power.

Keywords Social inequality · Senior English · Higher School Certificate (HSC) · Curriculum hierarchy · New South Wales · Examinations · Senior secondary education

Introduction

What role does English teaching play in the (re)production of social inequality? More specifically, how is Senior English – subject English as realised in senior secondary education – implicated in particular forms of social organisation, maintained
and renewed over time and across generations? Is it the case that Senior English works in some social interests and not in others? More generally, what is the social meaning of English teaching?\footnote{For related questions focussing mainly on earlier year-levels, see Sawyer (2017a).} These questions are rarely asked any more, although once they were at least more evident, both in the profession and in the wider educational research community. Indeed, there has been a tendency, in some quarters at least, to see subject English as more or less organically linked to a liberal project predicated on notions of justice and democracy. This appears obvious in that version of English which highlights literacy (Green, 2018a, pp. 169–70). However, even the place of canonical literature – often regarded by some as ruling-class cultural colonisation (see Widdowson, 1982, p. 3; Eagleton, 1985–86, pp. 96–97; Ball et al., 1990, p. 53) – has been defended in terms of being an “entitlement for all”, and hence a social justice imperative (see Newbolt, 1921, pp. 12–13, 60; Atherton, n.d., p. 1; Bishop, 2012; The Guardian, 2013). The problem is perhaps better understood in terms of the articulation of English teaching and the educational state – that is, its liberal-bureaucratic character. This is perhaps most starkly manifested in the final high-stakes examination, at the end of Year 12, when the discourse practice of English teaching and the social technology of secondary schooling come together in a particularly distilled, enmeshed form.

Our concern in this paper is to present a social account of Senior English, with particular reference to New South Wales (NSW). In doing so, we work from a recent study of curriculum outcomes and the senior secondary school curriculum in NSW, entitled Still Winning: Social Inequity in the NSW Senior Secondary Curriculum Hierarchy (Roberts et al., 2019). That study drew theoretically and methodologically upon previous work by Richard Teese and others in Victoria, thereby providing a complementary profile of senior secondary education in NSW. While thus allowing for a comparative view of upper schooling outcomes in two Australian states, which is useful in itself, it also opens up for similar empirical scrutiny the larger context of senior schooling in Australia. The present paper focusses on subject English in this regard. It presents a profile of Senior English as a field of study within the NSW upper school curriculum, drawing on the original report and new analysis of a rich dataset based on the 2017 Higher School Certificate (HSC).

Our focus here is thus on English teaching in NSW; however, there is considerable value, we argue, in thinking comparatively in this regard, while appreciating the specificity of subject English in different contexts. Hence, it is worth recalling here an earlier account of social and educational inequality in Australia, and specifically “how, in a systematic way, children across the country differ from one family background to another as if there were only one jurisdiction – that of the subject, English, a distinct strand of our institutionalised culture, sovereign in all States and Territories and invisible” (Teese, 2011, p. 5; our added emphasis). We think this needs to be qualified. While Senior English in NSW cannot be identified with Senior English in Victoria, other than generally speaking, there is certainly a significant family resemblance. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge a shared curriculum history, as well as a common investment in literary ideology, or the
articulation of literary discourse and social power. It is in this sense that we describe Senior English, the secondary school curriculum, and the HSC, as “dividing practices”, in Foucault’s (1972) classic sense, linked to “the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict” (p. 227) – notably, those associated with class, gender, race and ethnicity, and location. ² How this is realised in the profile of Senior English (Roberts et al., 2019) is our focus concern in what follows.

Still winning? Senior secondary schooling in NSW

The *Still Winning* report (Roberts et al., 2019) sets out to be “a comprehensive study of curriculum access and achievement in the NSW HSC, with reference to the sociocultural characteristics of students and schools” (p. 4). Its reference point is the 2017 HSC examinations, the outcomes of which constitute its primary dataset. It takes into account “… all NSW students who qualified for the NSW HSC at the end of the 2017 school year” (p. 6). Figure 1 neatly summarises its overall analysis: in terms

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² Here our focus is more particularly on questions of class and locality.
of the mean socio-economic status (SES) of students studying each subject, and the value that each subject carried in that year towards a student’s Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) (UAC, 2018), here plotted as the scaled mean for those HSC subjects that counted towards an ATAR.

As can be observed, Fig. 1 shows how the HSC effectively creates a hierarchy through scaling practices in terms of social value and status. The pattern ranges from what in effect become more prestigious, high-status subjects above on the right, including specific courses in English, Mathematics, Music, and History – because of their value for university entrance – to subjects effectively holding less academic value and prestige, including Aboriginal Studies, Industrial Technology and Community/Family Studies. The report shows that a hierarchy clearly exists in the NSW senior curriculum, with regard to “the mean socio-economic status (SES) of students studying each subject, and the value that each subject carries towards a student’s Australian Tertiary Admission rank (ATAR)” (p. 10). Thus, the report is a two-dimensional representation of the hierarchical structure of institutionalised school curriculum.

While Languages are not included on this graph, a similar picture emerges with these courses, ranging from “the old European and classical languages”, along with certain others such as Chinese (Extension), at and towards the upper end – to what has sometimes been called the community languages, including Arabic, Vietnamese and Turkish (see Roberts et al., 2019, p. 11). As the report states, unequivocally: “As a vehicle of educational achievement, these results illustrate that the school curriculum is indeed not neutral. Instead, it operates as a system to reinforce social status” (p. 13). What needs to be stressed is that this is not simply epistemological or organisational; rather, it must be seen as social and cultural – and hence as fundamentally political – in character. Curriculum hierarchy maps onto social hierarchies.

In summary, the “research raises questions about the nature of subjects in the hierarchy and why they are studied in such a clearly patterned fashion according to socio-economic status, location and gender” (p. 7).

Included among a set of eight key findings is that “[h]ierarchies exist within subject options” (p. 4) – that is, different subjects within this array exhibit clear internal hierarchies. This paper is focussed on subject English and the English courses: How are such hierarchies registered and realised in English? Subject English is interesting for several reasons in this context. Among them, and of particular significance, is its ambivalence: although long viewed as positioned centrally in curriculum and schooling, certainly in Australia but also elsewhere, across the post-imperial Anglophone countries, nonetheless its status has always been somewhat uncertain, at least epistemologically (DES, 1975, p. 5; Medway, 2010). Yet, its place has been secure in senior examinations, with its ‘examinability’ widely acknowledged and especially valued. This is clearly the case in NSW.

3 Of course, the scaled means of HSC subjects in any one year are not determined in advance, but are determined by the actual scores of the candidates across all of their subjects in that particular year. Nevertheless, patterns are created over time such that the subjects in which students enrol, based on their perceptions of the subject itself and their own suitability for it, along with the effects that their enrolments and results themselves create, all operate in a circular way. Moreover, it is the correlation of such patterns with mean socio-economic status (SES) of students that is our key concern here.
In what follows, we extend the original analysis with original bespoke analysis of the data informing the *Still Winning* study. The dataset comprises student-level data for every student qualifying for the NSW HSC in 2017 ($n=72,615$) and associated NAPLAN grades, demographic characteristics of students, and characteristics of the school they attended. The data are obtained upon agreement by NESA and under an approved
university ethics protocol and linked with publicly available data on schools published by ACARA. Student marks refer to the moderated examination mark calculated by the authority to ensure comparison between students in different schools (NESA, 2020, n.p.), while scaled mean refers to the mean for each subject as calculated by the University Admissions Centre for that year (UAC, 2018). Student Socio-Economic Status (SES) is calculated using the employment and occupation data for parents/guardians collected by schools. To create a continuous variable for each student, joint parental values were standardised and the mean calculated, allowing each student to be placed on a normal distribution relative to other students. In what follows, we focus on the five English subjects which include external exams and contribute to a student’s ATAR. These range from English (Extension 1) and English (Extension 2) which, along with English (Advanced), are located in the top right-hand quadrant, through to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English (Standard) near the bottom left-hand corner. These are further represented in Fig. 2.

As noted in Still Winning, “the subject English has the option of ‘Advanced English’ which is situated higher on the curriculum hierarchy than the option of ‘Standard English’ or ‘English Studies’” (p. 35). There is considerable distance, in fact, between the two clusters. English (Advanced) is marked by its contextualisation in Fig. 1 within subjects based on traditional academic disciplines (p. 10), with what is understood to be a distinctive form of knowledge and high-level literacy demands. Nevertheless, examination of the aims, objectives, and outcomes of each English course does not reveal radically different conceptualisations of English.

In terms of participation rates, in 2017, English Advanced was studied by 37% of the cohort, English Standard by 42%, ESL by 2% and English Studies, the non-ATAR option, by 14%. In addition to English Advanced nearly 7% of students studied Extension 1 and 2.6% Extension 2 (Studying English Advanced is a pre-requisite of Extension 1, which is itself a pre-requisite of Extension 2).

In Figs. 3 and 4, the data for English are extracted from the overall findings given in Fig. 1 above. The hierarchy for SES is shown in Fig. 3, which indicates that the mean mark for the various core English subjects that went into the ATAR calculation is seen growing with mean student SES. This finding is complemented when we consider the ‘social hierarchy’, represented here by each subject graphed against the percentage of tertiary-educated parents and the percentage of parents in professional or senior manager positions (Fig. 4).

Moreover, as indicated earlier, further consideration in the report is given to how SES – a proxy for class – is complemented by gender and location. The curriculum

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4 A further English subject should be noted – ‘English Studies’. However, since this did not contribute to an ATAR in 2017, it was excluded from the main array (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 24).

5 The numerical difference between Fig. 2 (‘scaled mean’) and Fig. 3 (‘mean HSC mark’) is that ‘scaled mean’ refers to the scaled mean calculated for the determination of a student’s ATAR. This is the external independent variable and is based on those students seeking an ATAR and thus is the mean for their ATAR scaling. ‘Mean HSC mark’ in Fig. 3 is the actual mark of students in schools where we have calculated subject means in subsequent analysis. Figure 2 shows the relative power of subjects to ATAR calculation, while Fig. 3 shows the actual relative performance in the subjects in schools, without reference to the ATAR.

6 The discrepancy between ‘tertiary-educated’ and ‘professional’ parents is marked in the case of the ESL course, which perhaps suggests something about how Australia deals with/recognises the tertiary qualifications of people educated outside an ‘English’ context.
hierarchy realised in the Report is organised in terms of the gender of the students studying particular subjects and also where they are located, with locational (dis) advantage recognised therefore as a significant factor. Gender would appear to be particularly relevant for certain subjects, with boys and girls differently oriented to particular subjects or subject-clusters. Subject English is especially noted with regard to gender. Questions are asked as to “why females undertake Extension English subjects at nearly twice the rate of males”, and, conversely, “why males study higher mathematics subjects at much higher rates than females” (p. 20). Figure 5 here represents this gender divide for English subjects, in which the much stronger representation of females in English Extension subjects is clear.

Figure 6 shows the locational indicators applied in 2017. Figure 6 is read as follows: “49% of English students in ‘Outer regions’ studied English Standard”, etc. (NOT “49% of Standard students were in ‘Outer regions’” etc.). Hence, English Standard dominates all regions in the Still Winning data, but more strongly so outside major cities.7 The key point is that “[s]tudents in non-metropolitan areas are studying subjects powerful in the hierarchy, that contribute to higher ATAR scores, at a lower rate than metropolitan students. This imbalance increases with distance” (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 23). This is further influenced by the characteristics of the school that students attend (Dean et al., 2021). Location matters, therefore.

7 For readers curious about why all columns nevertheless do not add to exactly 100%: English Ext 2 students are also enrolled in Extension 1 and Advanced, while Extension 1 students are also enrolled in Advanced, hence English Extension students here are double- or triple-counted. After that, what is reported is the proportion within each geographical category, so each such category has a distinctive denominator in the calculation. Thus, more metropolitan students means less variance on small numbers, while fewer students in ‘Outer’ means higher variance on fewer numbers. These are not raw counts across geographic categories – however, this method of counting highlights the real issue of relative proportion. (In fact, excluding the Extension subjects would still not equal 100% because of a small amount of missing data, and with a smaller ‘n’ in the ‘Outer’ column, this impact is more significant.)
A final matter to address here is the link articulated in the Still Winning report between NAPLAN and the HSC (Fig. 7). This is important, given that, as clearly stated in the report: “Early school achievement is strongly related to the subjects in the hierarchy that students will go on to study in Year 12” (p. 15). More specifically, as the report indicates: “On a subject by subject basis, there is a clear relationship between students scoring in the top or lower 20% of their cohort in NAPLAN in a given year, and the position of subjects studied in the hierarchy in the HSC” (p.16). While subject English is not necessarily a reference point in NAPLAN, particular specific versions of literacy are; and despite the fact that these versions of literacy do not necessarily reflect the literacies valued in English in the HSC, across the full array of HSC subjects, the correlation between average HSC grades and NAPLAN scores is noteworthy.

What must now be considered is how these Senior English subjects are conceptualised and also distinguished, in terms both of the institutionalised school curriculum more generally, and of English curriculum itself, specifically. We therefore
provide now a broad description of each of them, with respect to the integration of ‘content’ and ‘course’.

**HSC English courses in NSW – Focus: 2017**

In NSW, curriculum is divided into Stages, most of which consist of two years of schooling. Hence ‘Stage 2’, for example, refers to Years (‘Grades’) 3 and 4, ‘Stage 3’ to Years 5 and 6, etc., and the Senior Years 11 and 12 are ‘Stage 6’. This enables a distinction within Stage 6, which applied in 2017, between the Preliminary courses (usually Year 11) and the HSC courses (usually Year 12). In 2017, there were six Syllabuses in English in NSW for the HSC. Before considering these individually, particular things can be noted about the total suite of English courses – as below.

Syllabuses developed by the NSW Board of Studies were available in each of the following subjects: English (Standard), English (Advanced), English as a Second Language, English (Extension), and Fundamentals of English. English Studies was a Content-Endorsed Syllabus (i.e. not ‘Board of Studies-developed’) and available only in draft form for a number of years. As noted earlier, this course did not contribute to an ATAR. It should be noted, further, that Fundamentals of English was not examinable for the HSC itself. Usually undertaken in Year 11, it was always set alongside English (Standard) or English as a Second Language. English (Extension) contained two courses: Extension 1 and Extension 2. Students could study Extension 1 only, but if they wished to study Extension 2, they also had to undertake Extension 1. In Extension 2, students produced their own major work in one of the (then)

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8 A new Syllabus was published in 2017, to begin in Year 11 in 2018.
9 The current overall HSC curriculum was developed following a major curriculum review (McGaw, 1997 – see below) in which higher standards was a key aim, and which recommended the abolition of a course originally intended for students with weaker proficiency in English – *Contemporary English*. Teacher complaints over a number of years that there were students who could not access what then became the ‘lowest’ course in English (i.e. Standard) led to the (then) Board of Studies allowing a Content-endorsed course entitled *English Studies* to be available in the HSC.
forms: short stories; critical response; poetry; scripts (radio, film, television, drama); speeches, performance poetry; radio drama; video or digital media. Students take on extensive research in Extension 2, but essentially it is a course in which students produce their own major composition.

All NSW Board of Studies-developed Syllabuses had a common Rationale (Board of Studies, NSW, 2009a, p. 6), a common Aim (“… to enable students to understand, use, enjoy and value the English language in its various textual forms and to become thoughtful, imaginative and effective communicators in a diverse and changing society” – p. 7), and common statements on the study of English in the HSC year (p. 11). The courses were differentiated in the Syllabus in the following ways:

*English (Standard)* is designed for students to increase their expertise in English in order to enhance their personal, social and vocational lives. The students learn to respond to and compose a wide variety of texts in a range of situations in order to be effective, creative and confident communicators.

*English (Advanced)* is designed for students to undertake the challenge of higher-order thinking to enhance their personal, social and vocational lives. These students apply critical and creative skills in their composition of and response to texts in order to develop their academic achievement through understanding the nature and function of complex texts.

*English as a Second Language (ESL)* is designed for students from diverse non-English-speaking, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island backgrounds as designated by the course entry requirements. The students engage in a variety of language learning experiences to develop and consolidate their use, understanding and appreciation of English, so as to enhance their personal, social and vocational lives.

*English (Extension)* is designed for students undertaking English (Advanced) who choose to study at a more intensive level in diverse but specific areas. They enjoy engaging with complex levels of conceptualisation and seek the opportunity to work in increasingly independent ways.

*Fundamentals of English* is designed for those students who need to develop skills in using the English language effectively. The course equips students to participate in more satisfying learning. It assists them to meet the requirements of the English (Standard) courses or the English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and to achieve English language outcomes to support their study at Stage 6. (Board of Studies, NSW, 2009a, p. 12)

In a separate document, the Content-Endorsed English Studies subject was described as “designed to support students in developing proficiency in English to enhance their personal, social and vocational lives. It offers a comprehensive language experience that is reflected in the modes of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and representing” (Board of Studies, NSW, 2009b, p. 4). A sense of the differences between the Board-developed courses can be seen in the movement from “increas[ing] their expertise” in English Standard to “higher-order thinking” in English Advanced to “complex levels of conceptualisation” in English Extension.
In NSW, all courses are centred on literature. Apart from Extension 2, based on students developing a major work, there is no NSW Senior English course in which responding to texts is not a central concern. While this matter is discussed more fully below, its significance needs to be noted at this point. English teaching in NSW is expressly literary in its orientation, which means in this context that it is organised by what has been called ‘literary ideology’ (Green, 1990), to be understood as a complex, contradictory phenomenon having both positive and negative aspects and implications, socially and politically. Texts for HSC examination are prescribed externally by (in 2017) the NSW Board of Studies – although the HSC course English Studies did not have an externally set HSC exam and its text requirements were not ‘prescribed’, but rather ‘suggested’. The point to make here is that text selection is widely seen as a proxy for subject-specific knowledge in English.

What of the HSC assessment practices and the English exam itself? In 2017, both Standard and Advanced English were sitting two 2-hour exam papers. The first of these is a paper common to the two courses dealing with a common ‘Area of Study’ (in 2017, ‘Discovery’) in which students are asked to write in a variety of forms in response to previously unseen stimulus material, as well as in response to a question based on a Prescribed Text studied in class. The second paper in each course focusses on responding to questions on Prescribed Texts set for the Modules in each course. Three questions are answered on this paper in the two hours. Students in Extension 1 undertake a further 2-hour exam paper in which two questions have to be answered from an elective studied during Year 12 and using Prescribed Texts studied in class. Students receive school-based assessment marks which are moderated based on the school’s results in the exam and which therefore contribute to the student’s HSC mark. The ESL course examination in 2017 was made up of a 90-min ‘Paper 1’, a 1-hour ‘Paper 2’ on the studied Modules and Prescribed Texts, and a 30-min ‘Listening Paper’.

In the Standard and Advanced Papers which were set for those courses specifically (i.e. Paper 2, in which each course’s particular Modules are examined), identical questions were asked within each subset of the Modules, as had become the practice for a number of years. For example, in the Advanced Paper 2, subsets of Modules included an Elective Intertextual Connections, itself sub-divided into Shakespearean Drama and Film; Prose Fiction and Film; Prose Fiction and Non-fiction; Poetry and Prose Fiction; and Poetry and Drama. In the first of these sub-sections, the question was: ‘How is the portrayal of inferiority in King Richard III reimagined for a new audience in Looking for Richard?’, whereas in, say, Poetry and Prose Fiction, the question was: ‘How is the portrayal of longing in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poetry reimagined for a new audience in Tirra Lirra by the River?’ This pattern of identically formatted questions within each Module subset was true of both Papers 2 in both Standard and Advanced, with only one or two questions varying this pattern where conforming to it was not possible. The same is/was true of the Extension 1 exam.

10 Note that this subsequently became the NSW Educational Standards Authority (NESA), in January 2017.

11 For extended historical discussion of the nature of HSC English in NSW, its related syllabuses and texts, and its examination, see Manuel and Carter (2017b, 2017c) and Sawyer (2017b).
Senior English and secondary education in NSW: a brief history

The first formal secondary curriculum in NSW was developed under the auspices of Peter Board and dates back to 1911. A brief historical survey of Senior English and secondary education in NSW from 1911 indicates several enduring features. Right from the outset, subject English (‘English Literature’) was one of four key fields to be included, along with Mathematics and Science, and also History. As Manuel and Carter (2017a, p. 78) write: “English is singled out as the subject which, through the study of literature, ‘the High School will exercise its highest influence upon the general training of the pupils’ (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911, p. 5)”. Two features are to be especially noted in the 1911 secondary school curriculum, which will prove to be of enduring significance: one is the centrality of literature in the English course, and the other is the importance of public examinations. This remains consistent throughout the history of secondary education in NSW – a key aspect, indeed, of what has been described as its ‘classic’ or ‘archetypal’ curriculum style (Collins & Vickers, 1999).

The particular “conceptualisation of subject English” remains, structurally and ideologically, “largely reproduced – often uncritically and unproblematically – over the span of a century” (Manuel & Carter, 2017a, p. 88). The following outline of the “enduring features” of the English curriculum in question is worth citing in full:

… (1) a valuing and inscribed ideology of literature as a civilising, moralising and nation-building force and as a potential source of pleasure and personal edification; (2) differentiated courses, structured hierarchically; (3) prescribed text lists as a powerful regulatory apparatus, married to final examinations; (4) external examinations in the final year of secondary schooling with results in English tied to university entrance; (5) government legislated mandatory hours for subject English (and other core curriculum subjects); (6) English as a compulsory subject for all students in each year of schooling; (7) a centralised process of governmental control and regulation of syllabus documents, text lists and examinations; (8) mandated types of texts and quantities of texts; and (9) a privileging of written forms of students’ responses with essays being the predominant form required in examinations. (Manuel & Carter, 2017a, pp. 88-89)

This succinctly conveys the manner in which the subject is realised as “a particular vision of liberal education, within which literature is especially valued, with a bureaucratic-administrative framing of public schooling” (Brass & Green, 2020). That is, literary ideology comes together with a governmental apparatus, in the relationship between education and the state. The question can be asked, indeed, as to whether it is possible, or meaningful, to seek to distinguish the two: can English teaching, especially at the senior level, be separated from its deep associations with governmentality? It is worth highlighting here the reference to “differentiated courses, structured hierarchically”.

As already indicated, the 1911 English curriculum remained the template for successive reforms and debates. The 1930s proved one such moment, with the Wallace Committee and its subsequent Report. While subject English figured in this,
it was not markedly so, or at all central; English rather was simply assumed to be in its rightful place in curriculum and schooling – part of what was effectively “a core curriculum” (Hughes with Brock, 2008, p. 52). However, the issue of the public examination was certainly a major concern. The seeds of the later Higher School Certificate also were sown at this time, with a subsequent 1946 report formally recommending an extended secondary education: “At the end of this period of higher secondary education there should be an external examination in five or six subjects of which one would be English” (Hughes with Brock, 2008, p. 52). This latter formulation was made in the Wyndham Report, two decades on, and there are clear links between the Wallace and Wyndham Reports, with the apparent inconsequentiality and ‘inconclusiveness’ of the former somewhat vindicated by the latter’s success. The point to make in this context is that English is validated and endorsed as a compulsory and examinable subject, with its status linked decisively to its examinability as much as to its educational value.

Subsequent policy developments can be traced through the Wyndham Report (1957), operationalised in the 1960s, to the McGaw Report (1997). Subject English figured significantly all through this period, and beyond, linked to issues of access and examinability. A major issue became the provision of a suite of English courses catering for the full range of students. In this regard, an important development over the 1980s was the course entitled ‘Contemporary English’, referred to previously, related to increased senior school retention and deemed pedagogically more relevant and engaging for cohorts with weaker proficiency in English. However, questions arose about standards and accountability, and subsequently the McGaw Report recommended extensive HSC reform and, within this, the replacement of Contemporary English. The resulting situation regarding English curriculum provision, outlined above, remained constant up to the NSW Curriculum Review in 2020, within which English again is a matter of concern (Masters, 2020). What needs to be reiterated here, however, is the enduring centrality of examinations in NSW curriculum history, and the particular challenge presented by subject English in this regard.

Comparing Senior English in NSW and Victoria

Regarding Senior English and upper secondary education generally, a similar social analysis is available for Victoria, and this serves as both complement and counterpoint to this present account. It is also an important reference point for the Still Winning report. Richard Teese has conducted a large-scale comprehensive investigation of the senior school curriculum in Victoria, from WW1 to the early twenty-first century (Teese, 2000, 2014; Teese & Polesel, 2003). Although it is important to acknowledge the differences between New South Wales and Victoria, nonetheless there is sufficient similarity to warrant laying their respective situations alongside each other for comparison and contrast. Not the least of such similarities is their geo-spatial organisation around a major capital city – Sydney and Melbourne, respectively – with each bearing a particular metropolitan relationship to their respective (‘rural’) hinterlands. For Teese, there is a longstanding structural inequality built into the social practice of secondary education. This is particularly realised
in and through the high school curriculum. As he writes: “How the curriculum is constructed over time, the values that animate it, and the demands framed within it are all crucial in the production of social inequality” (Teese, 2000, p. 4). His work brings together curriculum hierarchy and stratified schooling operating together in the service of social (dis)advantage, which is inscribed, as he demonstrates, in “the history of secondary education in the twentieth century” (Teese & Polesel, 2003, p. 11). Far from being neutral, the institutionalised curriculum has proved to be “a willing servant” (Teese, 2014, p. 4) in the way in which knowledge is mobilised as a form of social power.

Subject English is deeply implicated in this. Long established as a central feature of the school curriculum, it retains its status and value across the vertical structure of schooling, culminating in Year 12. Yet, this is where “English is at its most traditional […], thanks to the presence of exams” (Teese, 2011, p.11). Curriculum hierarchy within the school curriculum is complemented moreover by the internal hierarchy of English, as both “hierarchically structured into subjects, genres and texts” (p. 11) and differentially organised within the school itself, in terms of timetables, staffing, streaming, and the like. Hence:

Both the formal architecture of English as a codified school discipline (curriculum as law) and the way English is designed and taught in school (curriculum as culture) enables advantages of resources, economic power and early and continuous success in school to be applied in the cause of both individual distinction and school distinction. (Teese, 2011, p. 11)

There is accordingly considerable constraint associated with subject English and this must be understood in social-structural terms. This is especially the case at the upper levels of secondary education, and – as one moves up through the levels of schooling with the apex being the final high-stakes public examination – at the formal interface with the university sector. Teese’s analysis and his ensuing argument make it very clear that curriculum and schooling in Victoria is indeed actively involved in the social production of educational inequality, and that, accordingly, “[c]urriculum structure is a translation of social structure” (Teese, 2000, p. 201), and particularly marked as such in the last and culminating year of the senior school.

There are several further observations we want to make here. The first is that Teese’s account is restricted to the city, i.e. to Melbourne itself. His work does not provide for a reading of what all this might mean for rural (i.e. non-metropolitan) high schools – for the hinterland. It does, however, provide the basis for a spatial analysis of educational inequality with specific regard to the city itself, and this is very useful for, and relevant to, extending the research focus to take into account the rural, i.e. English teaching and rural schooling, without assuming or succumbing to what has been called metronormativity. Secondly, it is pertinent to point to the nature of the competitive academic curriculum as a critical factor in (re)producing social disadvantage. This is to highlight its characteristic abstraction, above all else. “Subjects gain in value”, Teese (2000, p. 195) notes, “the harder it is to satisfy the demands they make on intellectual disposition, prior learning, capacity for abstraction, conceptual and operational fluency, memory and concentration, and interest in topics of remote vocational relevance”. The curriculum, realised
through the subject-areas, becomes increasingly intellectualised, abstract, literate. What becomes increasingly valued, and expected, is what has been termed “print-essayistic literacy” (Green, 2018a, 2018b, p. 161 [Note 11]) – which is why Teese points to the particular significance of the ‘essay’ in the senior school and certainly in English and the Humanities (“… the essay [is] the favoured instrument of assessment in English – and in other subjects, such as history, that demand[s] discussion” – Teese, 2000, p. 16). What is interesting, and needs to be emphasised, is the manner in which curriculum and literacy come together so organically in the senior school, as powerful realisations of modernist rationality. This is especially the case for those subjects consistently seen as high-status and towards the upper end of the curriculum hierarchy – including subject English12:

The subjects in which the most intense competition occurs are distinguished not only by their use in university selection, but by the scholastic and cultural attributes of the students who take them (Teese, 2000, p. 197).

Moreover, as Teese (2000, p. 197) further asserts: “It is not just any subjects that occupy the top levels of the curriculum, but those that give the greatest play to the economic power, cultural outlook and life-styles of the most educated populations” – which are also, socially, the most advantaged. Hence, senior schooling, privileging as it does abstract (“written”) forms of curriculum and literacy, tends to serve certain social interests and constituencies rather than others. In doing so, it “follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict” (Foucault, 1972, p. 227).

The question here is: Does this account overall have relevance and resonance for senior secondary schooling in New South Wales? The answer, quite succinctly, is: Yes. This is because, firstly, the HSC remains so influential in New South Wales, as widely acknowledged, and secondly, because subject English figures so significantly in the social-symbolic economy of the HSC. Indeed, the role of public examinations in New South Wales has long been a feature of the system, as already indicated, and the implications for subject English have been clearly noted (e.g. Manuel & Carter, 2017a, pp. 88–89).

Discussion

There are several points we want to make, in drawing this account to a conclusion. The first and foremost of these is that focussing on and extending the analysis of the 2017 HSC results and outcomes with specific reference to subject English confirms the overall findings of the Still Winning report, namely that a curriculum hierarchy is to be observed in NSW, influenced by SES, gender, race and ethnicity, and location. This is with reference to both the senior secondary curriculum as a whole, which has long featured English as a key component of its structure and organisation, and also, more specifically, the Senior English curriculum itself. A hierarchy clearly exists

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12 See Bleazby (2015, p. 674) for a particularly succinct and congruent account of high-status schools and their associated forms of curriculum and literacy. See also Roberts et al., (2019, p. 9).
within the Senior English courses. There is a marked distinction, socially, between English Advanced and the two English Extension courses, on the one hand, and on the other, English Standard and English as a Second Language. The English courses as a whole draw on and cater for different constituencies, or different social groups. The question then arises: To what extent is there a common value, pedagogically and professionally, in and across these courses in terms of what they are offering? Relatedly: How does this translate to outcomes, especially social outcomes?

To take English (Advanced) as a clear case in point: The 2017 cohort undertaking Advanced English reflect the findings of Teese et al. (1995) in *Who Wins at School?*. In addressing the gender issue specifically, Teese et al. argued that the “the real question is not whether girls as a group or boys as a group are more disadvantaged, but which girls and which boys?” (p. 109) – a complexity much discussed since in the academic literature, though often represented in the media as a moral panic about failing boys (Arnot et al., 1999; Collins et al., 2000; Gill & Tranter, 2014; Mills & Keddie, 2010; Zyngier, 2009). While girls were the majority of Advanced students, our analysis indicates data that Advanced students were also more likely to be: children of advantaged parents; located in the city, in advantaged areas in the city, and in advantaged areas generally; and enrolled in selective state schools or independent schools. What might this mean, then, for the proportion of the 2017 cohort studying English ‘Standard’ – bearing in mind that this is the course taken by the largest number of English students in NSW (Fig. 6) and noting in Fig. 2 the sheer distance, graphically, between Standard and Advanced English? And how might the comparative profile for these two English courses be understood in terms of educational opportunity and social (dis)advantage?

Secondly, if it is indeed the case that ‘literature’ has been both the basis and at the centre of all Senior English courses in NSW, thereby providing both curriculum coherence and consistency, is this sufficient? Or rather: Is this necessarily equitable? How does it make for social equality? This is to highlight the ‘literary’ framing of the NSW Senior English curriculum. It is still unclear, however, what this means or how it is to be understood. Is it a matter of the texts made available for study (see below) or the way these are approached (i.e. taught and read)? Or various combinations of both, as is most likely? Our further analysis extends the argument that a distinctive ‘curriculum culture’ is in operation in NSW (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 7). That point is elaborated thus:

The NSW curriculum culture is typified by a focus on a version of ‘excellence’ (Roberts, 2016) that draws upon a classical academic orientation, underpinned by notions of meritocracy (Yates et al., 2011). Similarly, the NSW assessment system, with its strong examination component[,] is a contributing factor. (p. 7)

With regard specifically to Senior English, it is the literary framing of the curriculum that characterises the subject and hence contributes to this traditional (‘classic[al]’) academic character. While this is particularly evident in the Advanced

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13 A seminal text, the title of which is referenced, of course, in the title of the *Still Winning* report.
and Extension courses, it extends right across Senior English, as noted earlier, and indeed features in NSW English more generally, as a matter of principle. It is worth thinking more critically about what this means. Minimally it involves working with literary texts at all levels, as an entitlement. But more complexly and perhaps more significantly it entails being introduced to a way of speaking and thinking, or an attitude, a perspective, and a set of capacities and understandings, a ‘literary literacy’. Teese (2011, p. 14) indicates that literature, as “a specialist field”, gives students “access both to a technical vocabulary (the meta-language of criticism) and a reservoir of literary interpretation”. This is something which has particular value, at least potentially, in the final examination, as “cultural capital” (Guillory, 1993). ‘Literature’ in this context connotes not simply ‘literary texts’, then, but also incorporates ‘literary criticism’ (as a technical language) plus a ‘literary archive’ (a body of interpretation and commentary, built over time and duly authorised). All this becomes a resource. However, it is a resource that is differentially accessed and utilised, and moreover it is predicated on a particular rationality, as realised in the ‘essay’ (Teese, 2000, p. 50). This is why understanding the social composition of those studying Senior English is crucially important, alongside a social analysis of curriculum outcomes, first and foremost in terms of ATAR scores. At the very least it requires due consideration of the proposal that ‘literature’ in itself, as a distinct category, is not unproblematic. This may extend to the distinctively ‘literary’ character of Senior English in NSW.

Moreover, what can be observed is that a particular orientation towards literature also characterises these differences. In 2017, of 25 pre-twentieth century texts on the Prescribed Texts List, only three did not sit in Advanced or Extension. Of these three, two were Shakespearean plays (one shared with Advanced) and the other the Australian poet Banjo Paterson. Writers other than Shakespeare on the pre-twentieth century list for Advanced and Extension include – predictably – Tennyson, Austen, Donne, Browning, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Yeats, for example. This is not to say that these latter courses are dominated by canonical pre-twentieth-century texts. Far from it: of 54 texts set for Advanced, for example, only 13 were pre-twentieth century. It is not that pre-twentieth-century texts dominated Advanced and Extension, then, but rather, where they did exist, it was rarely in Standard and never in ESL. Those twentieth-century texts/writers that would be generally regarded as ‘canonical’ – Eliot, Auden, Woolf, White, Wright, for example – occurred at about four times the rate in Advanced as Standard (recognising, of course, that such judgements about canonicity are subjective). That movement from “increas[ing] their expertise” in English Standard to “higher-order thinking” in English Advanced to “complex levels of conceptualisation” in English Extension which we identified earlier as differentiating these courses is, hence, not the only key factor. While it is not the literary per se that differentiates these courses, it is, rather, a traditional view of canonicity in terms of literary culture and textuality, or what is perceived as constituting quality ‘literature’ and hence appropriate for reading and studying in Senior English.

14 The issue of ‘text selection’ is relevant here – see, for example, Bliss and Bacalja (2021).
Teese argues, as we have seen, that Literature carries considerable academic power as a field, which would suggest that, in English, it encapsulates what Young (2013) has called “powerful knowledge”. Young’s notion of “powerful knowledge” has been extensively critiqued (Green, 2018a, 2018b) – for example, for its privileging of propositional knowledge over the interpretive activities that typically characterise literary studies (Doecke & Mead, 2018) – but his complementary notion of “knowledge of the powerful” as referring to “who defines ‘what counts as knowledge’ and has access to it” (Young, 2011, p. 150) is of relevance here. A prior question to be asked might be: Is literature to be understood as knowledge – moreover, akin to the knowledges associated with other school subjects? If so, what kind of knowledge is it? Teese’s (2011) distinction between literature as “a broad domain of imaginative writing” (p. 12) and as a school-subject may be pertinent here. It is more particularly with regard to the school-subject that literature becomes framed as knowledge. As such it is both socially valued and validated, and enduringly so, and knowledge that has been selected and authorised, in accordance with dominant and prevailing forms of social organisation and regulation. There is an important sense, therefore, in which it is rightly described as both ‘powerful knowledge’ and ‘knowledge of the powerful’. Literature is thereby pedagogised; it is effectively recontextualised. It is transformed. It becomes, appropriately, educational knowledge.

Here, it is appropriate to recall an earlier account of the relationship between English teaching and literary ideology, where it was proposed that “[l]iterature” has been assumed all too readily in English teaching as essentially an unproblematical category, in an important sense integral to the raison d’être of the profession and discipline” (Green, 1990, p. 141). Instead, following Raymond Williams, it was argued that ‘literature’ was better understood as a concept, and as “construct[ed] in and as history” (p. 139). This is echoed by Guillory’s (1993, p. x) emphasis on ‘literature’ as a “historical category”, constructed institutionally and over time. Important links might well be made therefore between knowledge and ideology, as concepts; at the very least, the relationship and the boundary between them need informed (re)consideration. Relatedly, ‘literature’ itself, along with literary knowledge, needs to be understood more explicitly in terms of ‘cultural capital’, and related in crucial ways to social class (Guillory, 1993, p. viii) – and here also, relatedly, to the issue of location and rurality. From such perspectives, it becomes possible to argue, firstly, that “… the category ‘literature’ is clearly divisive in its effects, on a number of levels” (Green, 1990, p. 155), and secondly, to emphasise “… the complicity of literature and English teaching as thoroughly intricated ideological practices, and hence as ‘dividing practices’ in Foucault’s sense” (p. 146). That is, there may well be effectively a doubling of the ideological work involved in English teaching and schooling, in its intermeshing, which is particularly heightened in Senior English. We want to stress that this is not to refuse ‘literature’, by any means – indeed, a recent study following early-career English teachers over three years has argued that it is through Literature that English teachers see the key intellectual work of English being done for all Grades (McLean Davies et al., 2022/in press; also Sawyer, in

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15 See Green (2018b) for an account of Senior English in Western Australia, drawing in notions of ‘cultural value’, ‘examinability’, ‘curriculum hierarchy’ and social power.
press). Rather, it is to urge a more informed, reflexive, socially critical awareness in this regard on the part of the field and the profession, in NSW and beyond.

Conclusion

These are all important issues and debates, and they need to be explored further and more fully. Our more specific focus here, however, is on the 2017 HSC, as a representative and indeed symptomatic moment in curriculum politics and English curriculum history. Enough has been said in this regard, hopefully, to indicate the significance of the relationship between ATAR (dis)advantage and SES, or rather class. There is a marked curriculum hierarchy in senior secondary education in NSW, and this is evident very clearly at the level of Senior English, as a particular subject area. Further, the indications are that curriculum hierarchy in this instance maps readily onto social hierarchy, and vice versa. This has been the particular object of analysis in the present paper. The questions to be asked now, in concluding, are these: To what extent is the social (dis)advantage inscribed in the Senior English curriculum in NSW reproduced as social inequality over time? – a matter indeed of ongoing research interest and concern. And how might this be investigated not just by further exploration of the 2017 HSC, as an exemplary social text of curriculum and assessment, but also more longitudinally, with specific regard to Senior English and the HSC? That work has scarcely begun.

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Ethical approval

The data used in this research was examined under University of Canberra Human Ethics approval number 20170077.

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