The Status of Literature in Secondary Schools

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Definitions and datedness  

Literature teaching is now in a curious condition. In many ways it appears as central to the project of subject English, and as unquestioned, as it was 50 years ago in the grammar school curriculum. A brief review of the National Curriculum for English and of GCSE specifications would establish this as a kind of ‘fact’. Such unquestioned status might seem itself, a serious problem in the digital age of the 21st century, surely there are now many other, equally valuable, forms of aesthetic text? Simultaneously, the actual teaching of literature, is suffering from a number of corrosive challenges to its status and to its purpose. The non statutory ‘National Literacy Strategy’ and ‘Framework for English’ have steadily eroded the practice of teachers, especially when teaching literature. The latter erosion has been also been accelerated by the assessment regime, the most spectacular example being the teaching of Shakespeare at Key Stage Three. So, although literature appears central, I would argue that it is, in terms of actual practice, increasingly marginal and that it is frequently being ‘used’ for an ulterior purpose to the claims made for its importance.

This article will attempt to review the status and purpose of literature teaching in secondary schools. It will be informed by current research into this aspect of English teaching but it will be principally an argument and therefore polemical. At the heart of the argument will be the emerging concept of ‘literary reading’ as understood through the increasing body of empirical evidence which attests to the very particular nature of this form of reading. An essential point will be the discussion of the concept of a kind of ‘literary literacy’. Such a discussion must also consider English teachers as a professional body and their relationship to literary reading, at least as much as readers as professional teachers, and this is the place to begin.

‘Subjected to literature’: The professional identity of English teachers.

Research undertaken over many years [Goodwyn, 2003, 2004, 2005] demonstrates very clearly that the great majority of English teachers have been ‘subjected to literature’, particularly the canonical tradition of English Literature. Expressed factually, this means that they have studied literature at GCSE, ‘A’ level and University. This is, as it were, still the default situation, so the exceptional candidates, for example, who do not have an English degree, and who become teachers, tend to be exceptional but also ‘have something to prove’. The expectation from Ofsted, for example, is still that a teacher of English will have, at the very least, 50% of their degree in English and that a 2:1 is the normative classification. Of course, English degrees are hugely variable in content but, typically, they contain a great many modules devoted to literature.

This ‘formal’ status is only half the story. In my personal experience of many hundreds of interviews of prospective English teachers the very great majority respond to the fundamental question of what explains their wish to teach the subject with the words ‘Well, I have always loved reading’ [See Goodwyn 2003]. It seems that, even if they think this is what they are supposed to say in order to impress the interviewer, they are all conforming to a dominant conceptualisation of the subject. The key word is ‘love’, this is an affective and personal relationship. However, like
so many loving relationships, it is fraught with complex feelings including its polarity, hate. When examining their formative reading experiences, many beginning teachers reflect on long periods when they did not ‘really read’ or on post university, when they could not ‘touch’ a poem or a novel for months and even years. This intense relationship with literature might suggest that as Eagleton [1975] once put it we are Leavisites whether we know it or not, that we are all Leavisites whether we know it or not.

However, this more extreme, even evangelical, Leavisite model, is now much reduced. My own career is usefully indicative here in that I started teaching in a comprehensive school in the late 70s with a strong ‘mission’ to ensure my teaching was relevant to my young people. I became much more interested in media texts and then, into the late 80s, in engaging with the ‘new technologies’. When I was teaching literature I wanted to ensure it reflected diversity and topicality. To me, and many like minded English teachers, literature, especially in its canonical form, had been too dominant. But, of course, I could still get my fix when I taught some ‘A’ level.

The phrase used above, ‘subjected to literature’, is carefully chosen. I am myself, still, a reader of literature and have so many formative experiences related to such reading [and watching plays, listening to texts and viewing films] that I cannot claim to be either neutral or impartial. I am partly formed by literary experience and so are the very great majority of practising teachers. The evangelical model has, rightly, diminished, have many beginning English teachers even heard of Leavis?. Absurdly simplistic notions of becoming a better person through reading ‘great’ literature are, thank goodness, exploded notions. However, literature is very often about the nature of ‘goodness’ and unquestionably enables us to explore moral issues; there is a relationship between what we read and who we are.

This relationship is complicated, sophisticated, problematic and infinitely variable and it is certainly not simply quantifiable or crudely measurable, although evidence is clearly emerging that attempts to capture literary reading in a more quantitative mode are very much worth pursuing, this will be discussed below. There is a degree of subjectivity in the experience of reading literature. Powerful literature subjects the reader to feeling its power. This is an experience which can be as traumatic as it can be pleasurable. Hence being ‘subjected to literature’ is a peculiar experience for those who have, as it were, systematically studied literature. But it is an experience potentially available to all. Should we still devote significant amounts of time, in the 21st century, to insisting that our students have this form of experience?

**Literacy and the literary**

The proliferation of literacies identified over the last 30 years, or at least, claimed, is an important phenomenon. Since the emergence of ‘computer literacy’ to more recent claims for ‘cine literacy’ or ‘emotional literacy’, the pattern emerging is that what was once a perhaps simplistic notion of ‘being able to read and write’ no longer reflects our understanding of how we make sense of the numerous codes that we experience in our daily lives. This recognition has also helped us to refine the original definition of literacy itself, from meaning ‘to be acquainted with letters’ to much broader and more inclusive definitions. Education systems around the world all provide attempts at these broader definitions and it would require a separate article even to list them. More importantly for this article, it is useful to refer back to Bill Green’s work and his
identification of the particular literacies of schooling [Green 1993]. His argument that school subjects are each organised essentially through its codes has helped us appreciate how challenging school is for all students as they try to assimilate the literacies of numerous disciplines at the same time. Secondary schools are entirely organised on this basis and, subjects, and their teachers, actually compete to get the best students for ‘their’ subject. Also this is now, well known, and understood, and it was something that the Literacy Strategy partly recognised and explicitly addressed.

In England, the teachers of English have increasingly had a problem with the term Literacy as it has become more like a subject in its own right. Whereas in many other countries English teachers have typically added the phrase ‘and literacy’ to their professional title, in England this has been absolutely resisted [Goodwyn 2004,2005]. Although both primary schools and secondary English departments may have a ‘Literacy co-ordinator’, the simple phrase ‘teacher of English’ absolutely predominates. This matters because it does demonstrate that the conceptualisation of ‘Literacy’ as promoted by the Strategy is recognised as ‘not English’. If teachers are asked about the name of the subject, currently they are emphatic that it should remain ‘English’ and that it should not be ‘Literacy’. This has essentially been a defensive position in the face of a veritable onslaught.

What this position has perhaps disguised, is discussion of what the literacy of the subject may be, as defined by its practitioners. In another article it would be worth discussing, in depth, which literacies are used in English and whether any are, in any sense, exclusive to English. For example, as mentioned above, both computer ‘literacy’ and ‘media literacy’ are much used within the subject, but they certainly ought to be used across the curriculum. Currently the only statutory home of Media literacy is in the subject of English and several other countries have also adopted this approach. So, practically speaking, media literacy ‘belongs’ in English.

However, my main concern here is literature and its ‘literacy’. It can be argued that other subjects may approach texts critically as English does, History for example. It is also the case that other subjects may study some literature, a little in MFL and some attention in Religious Studies? But no subject engages with literature as English does. One element of the research informing this article asked teachers to approximate how much curriculum time is devoted to the teaching of literature. This is a perception but it was remarkably consistent. For example the majority of trainee teachers estimated 60% and serving teachers 50%. Even if this is an overestimate [and it may not be] it is clear that literature, in some form or another, is being given a great deal of curriculum time.

For the purpose of this article I wish to examine the kind of literacy needed to access literature. The attention here will almost exclusively be on reading rather than either writing about literature or literary writing, these areas certainly deserve their own space. In order to examine the literacy of the literary it is important to review how the official Literacy model is impacting on it as this will help define it.

The ‘status’ of literature

This statement currently acts as a preamble to the National Curriculum for English [see the QCA website]:

The importance of English

English is a vital way of communicating in school, in public life and internationally. Literature in English is rich and influential, reflecting the experience of people from many countries and times. In studying English pupils develop skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. It enables them to express themselves creatively and imaginatively and to communicate with others effectively. Pupils learn to become enthusiastic and critical readers of stories, poetry and drama as well as non-fiction and media texts. The study of English helps pupils understand how language works by looking at its patterns, structures and origins. Using this knowledge, pupils can choose and adapt what they say and write in different situations.

If we examine the two key sentences about Literature in English then the first articulates that such literature is ‘influential’. Such a claim is hard to substantiate but if one took as one piece of evidence the number of students studying it around the world then the claim would seem reasonable. Equally, if one measured influence by sales of texts, the same would apply. However the pervasiveness of this literature is also part of the imperialistic past [and present] and ‘influence’ might usefully be interrogated as a very negative force.

Is such literature ‘rich’? It seems that ‘rich’ is used in the sense of full of abundance or of great worth etc. but it unavoidably carries connotations of wealth and power. Perhaps this ambiguity is of value in itself? The comment that it is ‘reflecting the experience of people from many countries and times’ is both true and misleading, we really ought to add ‘some’ before people. However this interpellation shades towards the pedantic. My own experience as a reader is unquestionably that I have gained enormously from such reading and I do believe that I have been provided with innumerable insights into the experience of others over both time and space.

The second sentence which contains the words ‘Pupils learn to become enthusiastic and critical readers of stories, poetry and drama’ is simply untrue, and in the current assessment regime, increasingly untrue. The research discussed below provides strong evidence to support this point. However, was it ever true? I think probably to a much lesser extent than English teachers would wish. It is not only the National Curriculum for English that has made grossly inflated claims for the enduring benefits of studying literature in school; and I do not mean here the extraordinary evangelisms of Leavis and his host of followers. The justifications for studying English Literature [which is almost always the actual topic] bear no close examination because the habits of adult consumers of texts clearly demonstrate that ‘Literature’ [with that capital L] is not to their ‘taste’. I am clear that some pupils can ‘become enthusiastic and critical’ and I am also extremely clear that insisting [which is what we do] that pupils encounter literature in school is a perfectly reasonable requirement. Any adult should be able to select a literary form of reading when they wish to and there is nothing ‘natural’ about it. It is learnt and most definitely can be taught. I am arguing very strongly for a definition of literary reading that includes words such as ‘engagement’, ‘immersion’ and ‘reflection’ in relation to complete texts and this would include texts, such as plays and novels, that cannot be held easily in the mind in their entirety.
A significant part of the present set of problems is neatly encapsulated in this paragraph from the DCSF, Standards web site which acts as a kind of preface to The Framework for English and aims to help ‘fulfil the requirement for the teaching of literature’:

There is clearly a balance to be achieved between providing classroom time to support the reading of longer texts and the imperative to secure progression. Having clear objectives lends pace and focus to the study of longer texts: there is less need to teach all possible angles on the text and more reason to focus on those aspects that cluster around the objectives. The aim is to provide enjoyable encounters, which serve the objectives well but do not demand a disproportionate amount of time. Teachers already use a repertoire of techniques (such as the use of priority passages, support tapes, abridgement, televised extracts, and recapitulation) to move quickly through longer texts without denying attention to the details and quality of the text.

‘The imperative to secure progression’, is a phrase redolent with all the negative connotations of the last decade. Its utter banal simplicity smacks of endless unreachable targets, measured against standards and benchmarks. How ironic that, certain forms of more ‘liberal’ pedagogy, have always been somewhat patronisingly called ‘progressive’. More to the point, this paragraph reveals the fundamental problem with an obsession with apparently focused objectives and the nature of learning, especially of something as usefully ambiguous, interpretable and personal as ‘literature’. At a practical level it might be summed up as follows ‘why read the whole thing when an extract will do?’

The research evidence, again, bears out a deep unease amongst English teachers [of all ages and stages] with the dominance of teaching through extracts [see below and Goodwyn 2008]. Of course, the final sentence about teachers and their repertoire is absolutely right and proper. Good English teachers learn just such skills of selection in order to introduce learners to all kinds of valid textual experiences, if anything I think they should have opportunities to make such selections autonomously far more often. But the issue for teachers currently is that they feel under such pressure that the rather messy and slow process of engaging with a longer text is conceptualised as either a luxury that cannot be afforded or as a desirable experience that must wait for the survivors of 5-16 who select studying at ‘A’ level. I would argue that becoming a ‘literary’ reader must involve the experience of a longish literary text and reflection on that experience by the reader. I would also argue that this experience needs to be refined through positive repetition coupled with maturation. Put simply, learners need this experience several times a year for several years.

**Literacy and the literary**

The two ‘manifestos’ above are both problematic in their own ways as has been demonstrated. However the former is certainly more aligned with what practitioners both preach and practice when teaching literature and the latter is far more an attempt to dislodge that practice in order to respond to the ‘imperative to secure progression’.
What are at least some of the characteristics of literary reading? Perhaps essentially they are about attitudes towards texts that are formed by a great deal of experience of texts and so provide certain kinds of useful expectations. For example, literature is not the truth but it is about truth. Literature is a code. If it is words on the page then these are, in fact, just black marks and the name of a character, say ‘Emma’, is just a particular arrangement of black marks. She never has ‘existed’ and yet, for perhaps many millions of readers, she palpably does, they even claim to know ‘her’ well. These paradoxes about literature have filled many a twentieth century work of literary criticism and I do not plan to emulate them here. The key point for us is that it is a mark of a literary reader to adopt what we might call a ‘mature attitude’ towards literary texts.

Firstly, it has often been claimed that English, unlike Music or Mathematics, requires a level of ‘maturity’ in its students. There is some validity in such a claim and the relative emotional maturity of girls is much cited as a factor in their ongoing success compared to boys in all aspects of English. Secondly, I am arguing for a maturity that is more to do with experience of texts themselves. That is that the reader has developed an attitude towards texts through engaging with texts over time. There is no conclusive evidence, not surprisingly about exactly how many texts this takes. And such a numerical approach may seem absurd. However, let us take a different statistic and it will seem much less so. There is evidence that, for example, many boys in secondary school, have never read a complete literary text independently and have no plans ever to do so. There is abundant evidence that even very committed adolescent readers experience a real dip in reading from about the age of 12. Again, the point is that counting the number of literary texts that an adolescent may encounter and read in full, between the ages of 11-16, does have a value. It is not that a literary reader cannot ‘handle’ extracts, they certainly can, it is that they ‘know’ that is not the point of a literary reading of a text.

Research about literature and literary reading

This section will very briefly review at least some of the growing body of empirical research devoted to trying to define and understand what literary reading [small l] actually is. It will also draw on some of my recent research, investigating English teachers’ perceptions of the current place of literature in the subject as taught.

For the purposes of this argument I will be deliberately simplifying some of the emergent themes of the literary reading research, the bibliography offers directions towards the fuller and more complex picture.

An initial point, which all English teachers will appreciate, is that reading ‘happens in the head’, in other words we only ever have second hand accounts of it through talk or writing. We also know that no two readings by the same reader, especially of literary texts, are ever the same. Therefore researching literary reading is methodologically very challenging. Another factor is that a great deal of traditional reading research implies that a reader has either comprehended a text or has not. Of course, literary reading involves comprehension, but mature literary readers do not expect what might be called ‘merely simplistic satisfaction’. They may even have internalised that an authentic literary reading experience expects, and even enjoys,
degrees of the incomprehensible; put simply, a powerful literary text is too full of meanings to be merely comprehensible.

Studies of literary readers mostly involve various forms of protocol e.g. readers ‘thinking aloud’ at points in their reading, or of being given sections of text, one at a time, and jotting down their immediate thoughts – they may then revisit these thoughts and reflect on their own revised interpretations. It is worth making the point even here, that this is time consuming, literary reading is always time consuming. A new avenue in this field of research is neuroscience which will eventually provide pictures of the brain as readers read. No doubt we will benefit from such research, but the situation in the classroom is currently very close to the protocol paradigm, that is we ask students to capture their reactions and interpretations through talk and writing, some times as they read, sometimes after they have read.

Miall and Kuikin’s work is central to my argument. One of their hypotheses is extremely simple but fundamental and that is that literary texts are just different. They can be described as different because of what we might simply call their style and their textual organisation. I think as teachers [and readers] of literature we do not see this as hypothetical but accepted. So another of their hypotheses, that is defamiliarisation, is more innovative for us. As they express it:

To examine these stylistic deviations and account for their psychological effects, we regard defamiliarization as a phenomenon that is central to literary experience: it is the hallmark of literariness (Miall and Kuikin, 1994, p.337)

I would express this as being ‘subjected to literature’, the text surprises you through its style and its demands on your interpretation, you have to keep on interpreting. In countering some text theorists, notably Kintsch , they argue:

At the linguistic level, we will show that stylistic properties distinctive to literary language such as phonemic or grammatical deviation must be taken into account. At the conceptual level, the local and global meanings mentioned by Kintsch must be supplemented by affective, imaginal, and personal meanings that readers bring to a literary text, prompted in part by their response to the stylistic features. (Miall and Kuikin, 1994, p.337)

The point about ‘local and global’ meanings is that readers are interpreting at the level of the word and sentence whilst simultaneously trying to understand ‘the bigger picture’, often with a text whose artfulness deliberately delays even the possibility of such an understanding. These texts are ‘affective’, they try to make us feel as we read, and they invoke our personal being, all of our memory may come into play as a source for eliciting meaning, that is what makes this text meaningful to me. ‘Imaginal’ meanings refer to that element of a literary text that, in sense, created by the reader’s inner vision. Put simply most readers take the textual referents to Emma and see her. For many people this imaginal characteristic is evidenced most often when encountering the phenomenon of adaptation and discussing to what extent the actress in question, fits, or fails to fit, our imagined Emma. Of course this ability to imagine, is highly problematic for many young readers and is something we need to address pedagogically, see below.
Finally, I should like to take from Miall and Kuikin what they call structured foregrounding:

We maintain, ---, that structured foregrounding enables a literary text to retain its identity and uniqueness for readers, an identity that readers often discern but cannot clearly explain

This is such a helpful point but also a great challenge. The foregrounding is essentially the way an author uses language for effect e.g. metaphors, alliterations, repetitions and so on and, as readers, we know this is part of the meaning making matrix. At the same time, this use of language is creating the overall structuring of the text, in one way by, say, the very frequent use of metaphor or another device, but equally by the larger structures that create the global meaning of the text, so, Emma, is about true love? But the identity of Emma, the novel, and of all the other novels that make up Jane Austen’s body of work, do have a ‘uniqueness’ and I discern it; if I am teaching ‘A’ level, then I need to try to explain and refer my students to the many other attempts there have been [and continue to be] to ‘clearly explain’ her meanings.

This is a key point for us. Can we make our students more discerning? Not in the rather narrow sense traditionally related to notions of ‘taste’, but in the psychological sense of developing heightened perceptions? Such perceptions would be both textual and also personal; the reading self is partly reading the self, as the text, itself, constantly engages our reflections on its unfolding meanings.

The current situation – findings from the 2 surveys

The work being done on ‘literary reading’ may offer a new and powerful, empirically based, paradigm which really underpins the purpose and value of teaching literature in schools. It would be extremely timely if some of its insights could find their way into the classrooms of current English teachers, partly because the research findings of this project show a strong willingness to revitalise literature teaching but also a stark recognition that much externally driven, current practice has very negative effects on current teaching.

In this section I report on the key findings of two nationally representative surveys of English teachers. Study 1 focused on student teachers of English in their final weeks of their training year, there were 182 respondents from 10 Universities. Study 2 investigated practising teachers – there were 254 individual respondents from 180 schools. In both cases these numbers are well below the statistical level that would allow for a claim of being truly representative, and this is acknowledged. However these surveys follow on from a many years of work investigating English teachers views about The Literacy Strategy and The Framework for English and the findings have a clear pattern of continuity [Goodwyn 2003,2004,2005,2008]. Initially the two surveys will be combined to maximise the sample and also because a number of the questions were the same, then they will treated distinctly for more fine grained analysis and because some questions were specific to the sample, Key Stages 3 and 4 are treated as one unit in these findings. The questions used are included in the
Appendix and the findings here are a selection from the data with the emphasis being on those questions that most directly relate to ‘literary reading’.

As a preamble it is worth noting that the reasons given for becoming an English teacher were remarkably consistent and can be summarised as follows:-

1. Love of /enthusiasm for/passion for the subject
2. Working with young people
3. Love of literature/reading
4. Being good at the subject

These four are in order of importance and it is interesting to note that 1. and 3. are very similar but that ‘love of reading’ is given a distinct status. Respondents do not put, for example, ‘love of language’. The three factors below are also significant;

5. Teaching is creative/full of variety/not an office job
6. The influence of an inspirational English teacher.
7. Good career/money/holidays

When asked to rate the personal importance of Literature to them then, 75% said ‘Very’, 20% just ‘Important’ and 5% ‘Fairly’, suggesting that, from the teachers’ perspective Literature remains central.

As regards its importance within the current curriculum then the results diminished its importance somewhat. Its current place was rarely seen as ‘Very Important’, only 20%, the next two categories were ‘Important’ 45% and ‘Fairly Important’ 30% and these figures are almost repeated for the prediction of the next few years. These figures suggest a solid place for literature although many comments were far more pessimistic, especially from experienced teachers who predicted the predominance of ‘Functional English’ and a much more Linguistic than literary orientation within the curriculum.

Estimates of curriculum coverage and numbers of Schemes of work [SOW] devoted to Literature again support a strong role for literature. All respondents were positive about having SOWs devoted to literature with about 5% stating that all their SOWs were such. However about 20% stated that three quarters were literature and the great majority, 60% estimated about half. It is worth noting here that the respondents who returned the survey may well be those teachers for whom literature IS very important. This may have influenced both their choice of school and how they interpret a SOW.

This point is partly balanced by the fact that the student teachers had no choice over school and were also administered the questionnaires in class i.e. where the pressure to respond was quite strong rather than self-selective. Overall it is clear that teachers PERCEIVE that a great deal of work in English is centred on Literature in some way
or another. As regards estimates of time, over 75% stated that they spent at least half their time on literature teaching.

An interesting difference is evident in the enjoyment of teaching. Of the student teachers, the great majority very much enjoyed teaching literature, with none saying they did not enjoy it. The experienced teachers were a good deal less enthusiastic. About half still put ‘very much’ but almost half put ‘to some extent’ and comments tended to be about the negative pressure of assessment, the need to cover too much ground, [especially poetry at KS4] and a general sense that their teaching was not really interactive or creative and certainly not ‘inspiring’ in the way they felt it should be.

Respondents were invited to reflect on the impact of the Framework for English on literature teaching, the student teachers were encouraged to draw on their conversations with more experienced teachers as well as their own views. 100% said there had been a strong impact. Of the approximately 50% who chose to respond by adding comments, 90% commented in the negative, all stating, in one way or another, that literature teaching had become much more instrumental, dominated by narrow objectives and focused on textual extracts. Half of these commentators expressed extreme frustration at the lack of opportunity to study a whole text in any detail or depth. Many experienced teachers also commented on literature teaching becoming ‘scripted’ and on the emphasis being constantly on the assessment objectives and ‘a right answer’.

Respondents were also asked to reflect on pupil response to literature as follows:

When students are being assessed on their response to literature, what kind of response is given most importance [regardless of whether you agree with this emphasis]? Please put these in order, I being the most dominant.

Analytical [ ] Personal [ ] Formal [ ] Creative [ ]

Please comment on your view of this order:

There were some differences between Key Stages 3 and 4 but fundamentally, and taken together, 80% put the emphasis on ‘Analytical’ and ‘formal’, with ‘personal’ and ‘creative’ as either 3 or 4. Of the half who chose to comment, the great majority expressed this emphasis as the key negative impact of the last few years stressing that they felt pupils were missing out on the real point of literary study. Equally they emphasised how disengaging the effect was on all pupils, even the most able, but disastrously so for the less capable.

Conclusions

Literature in secondary schools still has a strong ‘presence’ but its apparent material dominance masks a much deeper issue. It is still highly valued by English teachers both personally and professionally but its true status has diminished. This is principally because very narrow assessment objectives and high stakes testing are making literature, and especially extracts from literature, merely a vehicle for mechanistic outcomes. The more creative and personal responses to literature that teachers especially value have been drastically diminished. For example, the kind of
depth that teachers feel can be gained from a thorough engagement with a longer and more complex text are almost impossible to manage given ‘the imperative to secure progression’. It is perhaps too trite to mention ‘personalised learning’ here but an engagement with literature is clearly one of the most authentically personal experiences that a young person can gain. The empirical studies of literary reading are very clear that the personal is central to meaning making at all levels of engagement with a literary text.

If English teachers are granted any influence, if some of their autonomy is restored, then the curriculum will change, the assessment regime will be radically revised and literature will regain some of its significance in schools. However, perhaps with some irony, the rather taken for granted notion of reading a literary text will also need revisiting. The inflated claims made for reading Great English Literature, trumpeted so often since the nineteenth century, have long since been discredited. The emergent claims of the twenty first century are less grandiose and based far more on the experiences of actual readers. Equally, they do resonate with those previous claims in suggesting that, ‘literary reading,’ is an experience with quite remarkable qualities and benefits for those who genuinely engage with it. We will need to extend this emergent field to research how young readers begin to experience this phenomenon and, of equal importance, why so many do not. We know a very great deal about how to engage young people when we teach them literature, and with some of the current restrictions removed, that good practice can be liberated. We will need to revise and extend that practice as we take into account the new insights of the ‘literary reading’ movement.

Acknowledgements

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WEB links

DCSF (2008)
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/secondary/keystage3/respub/englishframework/Sect ion1Rationale/curriculum/national_curriculum/


Bibliography


Appendix

Questionnaire to secondary teachers

Dear Colleague,
we are investigating the current place of literature teaching in secondary schools and your personal, and professional, attitude towards it. This research, undertaken by the University of Reading, is entirely independent and is part of a project seeking the views of teachers, throughout England. We are taking a broad view of literature and so include the teaching of any texts for literary purposes not just texts considered to be ‘classic’. We appreciate that to estimate percentages of teaching time is difficult but it is the best way for us to gain a national picture.

You will find some additional space at the end of the questionnaire for further comments, all your contributions are highly valued. If you find any comment space too small, please put the number of the question on the final page, or use an additional sheet, and write at more length. Copies of this questionnaire are also available electronically [see the letter to your Head of Dept]

Your personal profile

Name [optional] _________________________ School _____________________

Type of school: 11-18 11-16 Mixed Boys Girls
Comprehensive Grammar Other

Please circle Male Female Age 21-23 24-30 31-35 36-46 46 plus

Years in service NQT 2-3 4-5 6-10 11-15 16-25 25 plus

What was the title of your University degree [or equivalent]?

1. How important is literature to you personally [as a reader rather than an English teacher]?

Very Important Important Fairly Important Unimportant

Please give up to three reasons why you decided to become an English teacher:

1.

2.
3.
Your teaching and your department

We are focusing here on Key Stages 3 and 4, there is a space to comment on ‘A’ level teaching at the end of the questionnaire.

2. How would you rate the importance of the teaching of literature in your department at KS 3?
   Very Important    Important    Fairly Important    Other [if so, please comment below]

3. How would you rate the importance of the teaching of literature in your department at KS 4?
   Very Important    Important    Fairly Important    Other [if so, please comment below]

4. Please estimate the percentage of teaching time devoted to teaching literature in your department at KS3, over a year.
   100  80  60  40  20  0

5. Please estimate the percentage of teaching time devoted to teaching literature in your department at KS 4, over a year.
   100  80  60  40  20  0

6. Does your department have Schemes of Work devoted specifically to literature?
   Yes  No  If yes, please estimate a proportion   Quarter   Half   Three quarters   All

7. Please estimate the percentage of your teaching time that you typically devote to teaching literature over the year.
   100  80  60  40  20  0

8. Do you enjoy your literature teaching?
   Very much   To some extent   Not much   Please give one or more reasons below:

7. Do you make use of the school library when teaching literature?   Yes  No
   If yes, please give one example:

8. Is your department involved in any extracurricular activities related to literature?
   Yes  No  If yes, please give one [or more] examples:
9. In your view has the Framework for English had any impact on the teaching of literature?

Yes      No      Please comment:

10. [KS 3 in preparation for the SATs] When students are being assessed on their response to literature, what kind of response is given most importance [regardless of whether you agree with this emphasis]? Please put these in order, 1 being the most dominant.

Analytical [   ]  Personal [   ]  Formal [   ]  Creative [   ]

Please comment on your view of this order:

11. [KS 4 in preparation for the GCSE] When students are being assessed on their response to literature, what kind of response is given most importance [regardless of whether you agree with this emphasis]? Please put these in order, 1 being the most dominant.

Analytical [   ]  Personal [   ]  Formal [   ]  Creative [   ]

Please comment on your view of this order:

11. Do you think Shakespeare should be a part of the KS3 SATs?

Yes      No      Please comment:

12. Do students enjoy studying Shakespeare in year 9?  Yes      No      Please comment:

13. Do you think the current assessment requirements of GCSE literature engage the students?

Yes      No      Please comment:

14. Do you think GCSE Literature encourages students to go on to study ‘A’ level literature?

Yes      No      Please comment:
The Future

15. How important do you think literature teaching will be to you in the next five years?

Very Important  Important  Fairly Important  Unimportant

Please comment:

16. How important do you think literature teaching will be in secondary schools in the next few years?

Very Important  Important  Fairly Important  Unimportant

Please comment:

17. In your view what would improve the teaching of literature at KS3 and KS4? Please comment below, or continue on a separate sheet if necessary. [If you wish to add comments on ‘A’ level teaching please do]

If you would be prepared to respond to some further questions please add your email/phone details.

Email: Phone

Additional comments [please use an additional sheet if you wish and attach it securely]

This document was added to the Education-line database on 23 January 2009