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The New English Teacher: Redesigning Pedagogies

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— I —
Introduction

We want to take you with us for the next hour on a journey - across times, across spaces, across the professional histories of English teaching and across geographical terrains within Australia, from South Australia to Victoria. But most importantly we want to move across generations - across generations of older teachers and younger teachers who are the focus of our current research and our keynote address: those early and first year teachers who are just beginning their careers at the start of the 21st century and those English and literacy teachers who have been committed professionals for around 30 years. In a sense the two groups of teachers we are referring to today can be roughly thought of as the graduating class of 1970 and the graduating class of 2000.

Our concern is to address the central focus of our strand and of the conference more generally about questions of professional identity and change for English Literacy Educators. We too are concerned by the increasing global obsession with standards developments, learning outcomes, accountability measures and its impact on the professional knowledge and practice of both older and younger teachers. But we want to come at these questions somewhat differently - by telling a set of research stories and weaving a few threads of hope from our current work.

 Everywhere we are beset by the insistence on the new - 'new times,' 'new English,' 'new basics,' 'new literacies,' 'new technologies,' even 'new kids.' And yet we are struck by the 'old' - the deterioration of educational workplaces and the physical and emotional exhaustion of the workforce. Persistent socio-political problems are escalating and new forms of poverty are impacting on the complexity of teachers' work. So what does it mean to be an English teacher now? What does it mean to redesign pedagogies for these times?

Teachers, we argue, assemble repertoires of practices across a career (indeed lifetime), much as others have talked about how young people acquire repertoires of literate practices over time. We believe that just as there is a need to scrutinise normative developmental models of students' literacy, there is also a need to question taken-for-granted understandings about teachers' professional development.

We're intrigued by the argument around teachers' work and identity that suggests there is a need for a radical rethinking of professional development and indeed education. Fischman (2001, p. 413) has posed a number of questions about teachers in this regard and the extent to which it is now possible to sustain a 'redemptive vision of education.' He asks:

- How realistic is it to remain hopeful about teachers in this global age?
- What is the new role of teachers in a globalised world?
- Will teachers increasingly become mere bureaucrats of a central state, or free-market agents competing for students, money and prestige?
- Will the global conditions promote a new professional model?

Fischman's point is that education is ambiguously positioned as a target for societal criticisms yet it remains, 'one of the last spaces of hope, a frontier dividing the critical juncture between achieving society's dreams or failing to uphold those aspirations' (2001, p. 413).

The stories we have to tell suggest that teachers are grappling with new identities, but they also give us cause for hope. We're working with a remarkable group of teachers to tackle one of the most persistent and difficult problems we face as a profession - unequal literacy outcomes. The group is remarkable in the sense that they have been prepared to confront their fears and doubts about their practice and to commit to a long-term research study to investigate the effects of their practices on different students. Our collective goal is to reduce the risks that attend schooling for some groups of young people, rather than producing such risks (McNaughton 2002). We want to make a positive difference for the kids most at risk now. In Brenton Doecke's
terms, from our pre-conference strand email dialogue, we are engaged in ‘making up the pedagogy together’, and then further seeing what the pedagogy does and what the young people do with the pedagogy.

In this address, we weave our emerging research narratives through alternating turns, as we explore some troubling and some optimistic stories from our ongoing project. Our presentation is in three main parts. In the first part we introduce the project and the teachers. We hear briefly from several of the project teachers about how they see (1) the job, (2) the teaching and (3) the students – three key and inter-related aspects of a professional identity.

In the second part, we explore in some detail the story of one young early-career teacher, Marc, as he learns more about teaching Willem, a young student he was worried about. In the third part, we offer provisional findings from these layers of stories about what we are calling turn-around pedagogies – practices which reconnect at-risk young people with literacy, schooling and education and which foster significant professional identity work for teachers.

While we were writing this paper, we learned of a different version of the term ‘turn around’ currently favoured by managerialists in the UK who are keen to ‘turn around’ schools, teachers, or literacy test results. We want to be clear that we use the metaphor ‘turn around’ because we find it more flexible and provisional than such grand terms as transformation – and certainly we locate our use of the term outside managerialist discourses which seek to quantify ‘progress’ mainly for financial and political gain.

The project

The study, Teachers investigate unequal literacy outcomes: Cross generational perspectives, is a three-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council. We are working with two teams of teacher-researchers in South Australia and Victoria. We recruited five early career teachers in each state and asked them to invite a colleague with considerable experience (twenty-five years of teaching or more) to work with them in a reciprocal mentoring arrangement, that is, they would support each other to study the problem of unequal literacy outcomes as it manifest in their particular contexts.

More specifically the project has the following aims:

- develop and analyse an historical archive of literacy teaching that will inform young teachers, curricu-
- lum and policy planners and teacher educators
- create research dialogue between young teachers and their late career mentors and examine its effects on practice
- analyse ways in which teachers consciously redesign specific elements of their practice to connect with marginalised students
- develop collaborative, cross-generational teacher research communities to produce new knowledge on old questions
- advance the conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches to literacy and teacher practitioner research.

There are three phases to the project. In Phase 1 the teachers worked together to co-produce an historical archive and retrospective analyses of their literacy teaching. They interviewed each other in pairs about inequitable outcomes – their own experiences of this at school, as student teachers, as teachers across their career, and, importantly, from their perspectives, the kinds of interventions that have made a difference.

One of the most experienced teachers reported that in all the years he’d been teaching (since 1969) this was the first time anyone had ever wanted to know what he did and how he did it. No-one had ever asked before. The interviews also allowed a different kind of authority and speaking position for young teachers. Listen, for example, to the questions early career teacher Marc asks to tease out his own location as a literacy practitioner in relation to his late career partner/colleague Ethan.

Has it been a progression do you think, to reach the point where we are now?
Has it changed across time? Where was the push coming from?
Among all this change that has happened that you’re talking about, as a teacher where do you fit in? Do you feel as though you’re forced to fit in…?
You were saying how you view us younger people, or new teachers, as more curriculum driven and outcome driven, so are we missing something somewhere? This is my first year. Didn’t it work this way previously?

In response to Marc’s barrage of questions, we saw Ethan begin to reveal chinks in his teaching armoury.

In the last few years I’ve felt under a lot of pressure. What I am doing I am not just coping yet. I’m getting almost some of the same outcomes as some of the gurus of the school doing Early Years but I’m not doing a lot of the Early Years properly. I know that. Like I said, I’m heading the right way but I don’t think management would agree with a lot of the ways I do it.
To hear older more experienced teachers talk about how things have changed, about the way they strategically operate within and sometimes despite the constraints of the system, and importantly about how they sometime don’t cope all that well themselves, was a significant experience for many of the early career teachers.

Of course, there were also some hilarious moments as the generations of teachers looked across at each other with new eyes. Like the time when Ethan was explaining to Marc that although naturally left-handed, he had been forced at school to write with his right hand.

Marc: How did that come about?
Ethan: No, we’ll go back to when I was learning, we didn’t have biros, we had the ink pens, you had to dip the ink in the inkwell, and if you write left-handed you smudge what you wrote over, so they made you all write right-handed, so all the writing was un-smudged.
Marc: You were back in the time of inkwells?
Ethan: No, not quite. See how times have changed.
Marc: That’s incredible. I’m just boggled at the whole inkwell thing. I’ve seen them in the movies. So you just didn’t have a choice in the matter?

Our analysis to date suggests that the opportunity for extended dialogue between teachers about their practices and experiences allowed for a kind of truly reciprocal exploratory talk that is unusual in teacher education. Admission of doubts, genuine questions, provisional evaluations about what was and wasn’t working were coming from both early and late career teachers.

At the same time we were running research workshops in each state at the university where our role has been to induct the teachers into undertaking research and to support them to conduct it. The SA and Victorian teachers were reading and discussing educational research and theories that tackled the questions related to poverty, class, race and literacy outcomes (e.g. Dyson 1993, 2003, Janks 2003, Luke et al. 2003, Moll et al. 1992, Thomson 2002) and our own work (Kamler 2001, Comber and Simpson 2002). We collected, considered and tried out different conceptual resources – the four-resources model of reading, virtual school bags, permeable curriculum, funds of knowledge, critical literacy, productive pedagogies and so on.

In Phase 2 of the project this year, our focus shifted to the teachers’ classrooms. They conducted a classroom audit of their current literacy practice and its effects on different children. They selected a child whom they had identified in the audit as ‘at risk’ and closely examined how this child responded to the curriculum and pedagogy on offer. From this close study, reading related research and through intense conversations with their colleagues and the university-based researchers in the workshops, teachers began to consider what might help this child (and others in the class) better connect with the literacy curriculum.

As a result, they redesigned an aspect of their literacy curriculum or pedagogical delivery hoping to make a positive difference to students at risk. Later we’ll take one illustrative example that exemplifies the kinds of pedagogical re-designs many of the teachers undertook. But first we want to give you more of a sense of who these teachers were and consider how they are part of a larger and changing teacher workforce in Australia.

The teachers

One of the reasons we initiated this project has to do with the changing demographic of the teacher workforce and our concern that the accumulated wisdom of practising teachers may soon be lost to the profession as a generation of teachers approaches retirement.

As this graph shows, the Australian teacher workforce is getting older.

We see here changes in the age profiles of all teachers in Australia between 1991 and 2001. The national teacher labour force was considerably older in 2001 than in 1991 and there are fewer teachers in the 34 and under age categories.

Figure 1. Average ages of teachers, all schools, Australia, 1991 and 2001
The teachers in our project include 10 early career and 9 late career teachers in two states. (One early career teacher was unable to find a mentor.) The table below gives a little information about who they are in terms of gender, age, years of experience and so on. Many, but not all of the teachers worked in schools with high levels of cultural diversity and poverty.

We’d love you to meet them all and tell stories from many of their experiences. However for reasons of time only, we’ll talk mostly about a few: Peter, Kate and Marc. We’ll hear from them about how they see the job and the work of English literacy teaching. We’ll then turn briefly to what they and some more experienced colleagues have to say about the students and finally we’ll turn to their thoughts about teaching itself.

The job
Given that the profession is changing in terms of who the teachers are, their stages of life and their reasons for being there, it is important to consider English literacy teaching and professional identity within the context of the job itself, the conditions of labour and employment. For a number of the project’s early career teachers just getting a job teaching was a challenge, if not a major obstacle. Consider Peter’s story.

Peter had done an Arts degree at a sandstone university and really wants to be a writer. However he decided to get a teaching credential because he needed paid employment and he was good at English. After graduating Peter’s first appointment didn’t come for six months. He spoke of his frustrations dealing with a bureaucracy intent on processing details about preferred location, availability for teaching and length of appointment which, once ‘in the system’, seemed indelibly marked against his identity number: his attempts to have his application updated were thwarted by unavailable personnel and people who didn’t bother to return his phone calls.

Eventually he was appointed to a high school in a country town where he taught English and Society and Environment. While the town is enjoying a boom due to the wine industry it has significant pockets of long-

Table 1. Victorian Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Current class</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>Outer North-West P-12 School</td>
<td>Cheryl</td>
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<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>Outer North-West P-12 School</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>Rural Independent School</td>
<td>Joanne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Literacy &amp; Numeracy</td>
<td>Rural Primary School</td>
<td>Jill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwenda</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Years 7-11 English &amp; SOSE</td>
<td>Rural Secondary School</td>
<td>Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Years 7-12 English &amp; History</td>
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<td>Gwenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marc</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>Outer Northern Primary School</td>
<td>Ethan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>Outer Northern Primary School</td>
<td>Marc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>Rural Independent School</td>
<td>Frances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Grade 5/6</td>
<td>Rural Primary School</td>
<td>James</td>
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Table 2. South Australian Teachers

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Current class</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 8-11 English</td>
<td>High School, northern suburbs of Adelaide</td>
<td>Jenny</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Year 4-5</td>
<td>Riverland region of SA</td>
<td>Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year 2/3</td>
<td>Northern country region of SA</td>
<td>Matilda</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matilda</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Year 2/3</td>
<td>Northern country region of SA</td>
<td>Riley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freda</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Year 3-5</td>
<td>Learning Centre, southern suburbs of Adelaide</td>
<td>Lorraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorraine</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Year 4-7</td>
<td>Special class in a primary school south-eastern suburbs of Adelaide</td>
<td>Freda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>Catholic Primary School, south-western suburbs</td>
<td>Nola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nola</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reception – Yr 1</td>
<td>Catholic Primary School, south-western suburbs</td>
<td>Sam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Year 9-12 English</td>
<td>High School, south of Adelaide.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
term and new poverty with people attracted to its cheaper housing. Peter began enthusiastically, driven by his own passion for reading and writing literature. He was kindly advised by colleagues that his expectations for the students were too high, but encouraged by his late career mentor and his own love of reading he persevered, and as he put it 'some of the kids were really interested and responded really well'. However living in this town was a problem for Peter. Not being interested in sport meant that there were few options for him to pursue in his free time. He described the community as 'red-necked' and it was not unusual for him to be the victim of verbal abuse when he walked down the street. His dress-code and style meant that he was often mis-identified as homosexual.

It wasn't an easy or rewarding place for Peter to live and he was one of only a few young teachers appointed to the area. Although the school had a vacancy for a full-time English teacher he was not re-appointed the following year - his application should have matched, but he discovered that according to the Department he was available for 0.6, and his previous country location was not listed in his preferred choices.

For the first six months of this year he has been doing temporary relief teaching in schools with the most disadvantaged kids in one of the most depressed areas of Adelaide, often replacing teachers who are on stress leave. Mostly he has not been teaching English - just whatever the school has needed on the day - and he has been learning to deal with behaviour management, student resistance and his own growing sense of disillusionment.

At a research meeting of our project teachers, Kate at a disadvantaged high school in the southern suburbs recognised Peter’s plight. Yet her experiences, whilst having a great deal in common, were nevertheless different. Peter being young, male, single and an English teacher is positioned very differently from Kate who came to teaching after years running a small business, studying Law and raising three children. Her habitus, her work and parental history allow her to take up an authoritative and educative position with the young people she is assigned.

Let’s turn now to Kate’s experience starting out. When she finished her degree Kate was immediately offered a job. Here’s how she tells her story.

So I finished uni in November 1998, didn’t have a job, six years at uni and oops no job. The day before school went back in January 1999, I got a phone call from the Education Department and they said ‘Would you like a one-year contract’ and I said ‘I’ll do it’ and she said ‘Don’t you want to know where it is?’ and she said ‘It’s at South Beach High School’, and I said ‘Great I’m there’. I had an induction day the next day and the following day I started teaching six classes of English. That was the contract, and I had a home group, and I don’t think anything I had done had prepared me for it ... I was luckier than younger people because I had lots of life experience, and I had brought up three children so I had those sorts of experiences, but as far as actual classroom experience, I mean I did two blocks of four weeks of prac (one in a private boys school and one in a country high school).

Friends and family expressed surprise that Kate would want to teach at South Beach High School, but she was unperturbed. In fact she appeared to thrive, as we will see later. Yet despite a very successful year and her willingness to continue at South Beach Kate’s contract was not renewed either. She explains what happened.

At the end of that year no contract, so I did the misery thing all over the Christmas holidays. First two weeks, nearly three weeks of first term I didn’t have anything. I went down to South Beach and said ‘Can you give me some TRT work?’ and I got pretty much every day for about a week, and during that time somebody would slide up to me in the staffroom and say ‘Do you reckon you could teach such and such?’ and I’d go ‘Yep, not a problem’. I mean I actually can’t remember now but I think first term I ended up teaching Sport, Textiles which is sewing, which I loathe with a passion. I think I had one class of English, cooking, and Health, so that was different again, and I did a few different things during that year.

They asked me to run a program with students at risk, so I did that for the second half of the year, it wasn’t a huge amount of time, so I wrote it myself, developed it, and delivered it to a group of students who were at risk of basically being asked to leave the school. That was very challenging but I really enjoyed that, and I also ran a program with some of the Indigenous students.

Kate’s story, like Peter’s, raises significant questions about gaining and keeping employment as a teacher, let alone a career as an English teacher. Many teaching graduates don’t get employed as teachers; many go into other employment and are lost to the profession. Of those who do get jobs, they often have to be very flexible about what they teach, where and when. Yet Peter and Kate’s stories raise other questions, too, about the kinds of schools where new teachers are being employed and the kinds of workloads they are being assigned. They raise questions about who gets to teach the most at-risk students in our public schools.

These stories also raise questions about the job now – the changing needs of schools as workplaces seeking certain kinds of graduates with the preparedness and the expertise to tackle situations that experi-
mented teachers often shy away from. It is not that we believe young teachers do not have or cannot quickly acquire the capacities for this work. Indeed we know many who have. It is simply that we believe that the assignment of early career teachers to some of the most challenging pedagogical work needs careful planning and review. We also wonder what might be accomplished with the collective resources of both generations.

One of our questions in this project and of the Professional Identity and Change strand is to what extent the work of English/literacy teachers is changing along with wider social change, including growing ICT access and use in homes and workplaces, global economies, population shifts, and school reforms such as middle schooling. Beyond the project and indeed English literacy teaching are issues about the changing nature of teachers’ work and work intensification. In considering teachers’ professional identities at this time, clearly these issues are important. They cannot simply be bracketed off whilst we enjoy the luxury of curriculum design.

Over the past decade many education researchers have noted the intensification of teachers’ work internationally (Hargreaves 1992, Troman 2000), but in our project we are seeing how this impacts locally on the bodies and minds of our teachers.

Certainly we saw the impact on late career teachers such as Ian, an experienced secondary school English teacher, who was due to retire in the first year of the project. In response to the federal government’s quality agenda, his school had created a new position entitled Manager: Effective Teaching and Learning (METAL). Ian’s job was to work with staff across the curriculum to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the school. He observed in classrooms, offered advice to teachers, dealt with difficult students, mentored other teachers. Students, of course, had their own views about why he appeared in their classes, which is why they called him Heavy Metal.

The rest of Ian’s workload allocation was devoted to teaching English, but even in the last years of his career, the nature of his work was significantly reshaped and intensified. Of interest here is the invention of new work roles (even for teachers who have been teaching a long time) and the likelihood that they may be taken up by English teachers.

The teaching

What we’re seeing is English teachers being asked to do new things by their institutions. Yet we’re seeing that many teachers are picking up the new agendas and running with them – teachers such as Kate, who talks about how English is being re-made and re-negotiated to do new kinds of work in a school located in a low SES community.

We have a strong student voice, forum, in the school, but just the more general stuff really just wasn’t working at all, and still isn’t working at all, but what Bev and I did was when we got this grant, we had identified that one of the – and this is a pretty general thing I think for teenagers – is that they actually do care about the environment. They throw their food all over the ground in the yard, but if you said to them that such and such business down the road, because we’re very close to the beach and a lot of them are surfie boys, were putting some sort of pollutant into the water, they’d be outraged, total outrage, so we thought ‘OK, how can we use that?’

So what we actually did was when the … there was a student voice conference at the beginning of last year. We asked for students who would be interested in doing some work on environmental issues within the school, and we entered up with 17 students from years 8 right through to 12, and then because Bev was the Year 9 coordinator, she actually asked a few naughty girls who were getting into trouble and being sent to behaviour management and being suspended and all those sorts of things, asked them to join. And we did some work with Pat Thomson on that, and it’s been written up as our Civics and Citizenship Project, but that has had some quite far-reaching effects within the school.

It has been a real high point, and it’s been about things like we got permission from the principal … the school uniform is a navy blue T-shirt with a South Beach High School logo on it, so we actually got permission for this group to have white T-shirts, and they designed their own logo which was a mix of the South Beach High School logo, and they called themselves Youth Environment Activists, so it was white and it says YEA on their T-shirts, and all that stuff about standing out, ownership, we let them decorate a classroom and that’s where we hold our meetings, all of those things have had a huge impact on these kids. Two of them are going off to a Rotary Youth Training Program in the school holidays. One of them has just been invited to go to some meeting with John Hill, so they’ve had some really empowering experiences as a result, and these were pretty much kids who if you’d asked 70% of the teachers in the school, would have said they were ratbags and they’re not.

They have really, really blossomed, and now because I am the English coordinator and the School’s Promotions coordinator this year, I’ve actually started up a journalist group along the same lines, so yesterday they got their T-shirts. I think the principal is going to go insane because they’re all going to be running around in all these T-shirts, but if it works it works, and
I took them to the Come Out launch, and some of these kids do have some real literacy issues, but because they're so proud and empowered by their new role within the school, they're willing to put in so much more effort because they've got ownership of it and it does matter, and they go from 'I don't care' to 'I actually do'. I mean they won't tell you that, they won't verbalise that directly, but their actions certainly verify the fact that they do value it.

Kate's account of these projects interests us in a number of ways. We believe it portrays 'new English' curricula, or at least new work for English teachers. It starts from a hot issue for students (not only their teachers), that is, the state of their immediate environment. It is organised as a project with specific goals, events, texts, objects and community connections. The in-school work involves out-of-school objectives and in connecting to the community, it re-connects the students in positive ways with the schooling process and indeed reformulated school literacies (such as journalism in the second project).

**The students**
Several experienced teachers argued that the young people they were working with now were different from past students. Some saw family lives as having changed radically and a few teachers believed that some families had lost their aspirations for their children's education. We are concerned with how teachers understand that difference manifesting in the classroom and affecting what can be accomplished. One teacher described the situation in her school community in the following way:

> We have long-term unemployed. And a lot of transient families that come here because it's cheap housing and they have absolutely no aspirations for their children in school. My biggest aim is to get them to come to school in the first place ... They don't look at school as being a very important place except for babysitting.

Collaboratively, and critically, we are working to test these beliefs and certainly to interrogate any deficit assumptions. Yet at the same time we want to pursue the question of whether young people's lives are different now in ways that impact on their capacities to engage in their schooling. Clearly, there are some differences in the student population in terms of adult re-entry, percentages of ESL, and escalating levels of poverty. Yet even in the light of these differences, some teachers are adamant in rejecting vocabularies of disadvantage and refused to blame students or their families.

Let's hear from Kate again.

I've done nothing but increase my admiration for the students that I do work with, because when you find out where they've got out of bed from this morning, and what's going on in that house, and again I'm generalising and probably not even generalising, it's probably fewer than more of them, but I just go 'Wow, you got out of bed this morning and you got yourself dressed and you had a piece of toast, or you didn't have anything to eat because there was no food in the house, but you're here. Yes, you're ten minutes late, big deal, you got out of bed. I would be hiding under the bed. I just think they're brilliant, they really are. That's why I wouldn't ever give up on any of them. That's what I say to them 'I'm not giving up on you', and they go 'Ooh!'.

Many early career teachers expressed concern about the incredible range of children in their classes in terms of language and literacy proficiencies. They talked about how frightening it was to decide where to aim their teaching and how difficult it was to design and carry out their programs when kids had such varied capabilities with text. Teachers talked about the students who were hardly ever at school, those who were on their last chance in terms of behaviour management regimes, but they also – especially as the project gained momentum – talked about the wonderful kids, the young people who amazed them and we are currently pursuing those stories.

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**II**

**Turn around pedagogies: The story of Marc**
The teachers we've just heard from see it as their responsibility to connect with kids and they refuse to give up on them – a lesson that early career Marc – whose story we now turn to – has already appropriated during his participation in the project. We use Marc's story to tease out what it means for teachers to 'turn around' pedagogies, to turn around their own ways of viewing and reconnect with their most challenging students.

Marc teaches at a primary school on the northern outer fringes of Melbourne. The school is large, with a population of almost 800 students. Development in the area has exploded, with new housing estates replacing dairy farms. There are five large primary schools servicing the area. Marc's school was established in 1998, to meet the demands of the young, predominantly migrant families moving into an area where housing was affordable. The school has students from a wide range of countries, predominantly Middle Europe, Central Asia and South America and most children speak a language other than English at home. The
school has grown rapidly; it began with 12 staff and enrolments of 150, and has increased its teacher population by approximately 10–12 staff each year. The school is unique across the project, in that with a staff of 67 teachers, 90% of them are under 35 and the majority of these teachers are under the age of 30.

In the first year of the project, when Marc was interviewed by his late career mentor Ethan, he talked about his frustration with parents and took up some of the ‘blame the family’ discourses in his description of his first year of teaching – blaming the low aspirations of parents for the poor literacy performance of some his students. When he was asked by Ethan if home visits might help, he said they might be a good idea but there was no time.

During the research workshops at the university, Barbara and I explained how influenced we had been by the work of Luis Moll (Moll 2000, Moll et al., 1992) where teachers learn how to be community ethnographers and visited families in order to learn about their funds of knowledge and community networks. We explained how we had worked in a similar way in the 100 Children Go to School Project (Hill et al. 2002) and that it had powerful and positive effects for the teachers who made the home visits. We also discussed Pat Thomson’s (2002) idea that all children have virtual schoolbags which are full, but only some children get the opportunity to open them and make use of what’s inside in their school lives.

Nevertheless, we were surprised at the start of this school year (and the second year of our project) when Marc burst onto the teleconference telling us about the home visit he had made to see Willem, his nominated case study child. As we had not tape-recorded the teleconference, we asked Marc to write about the experience. This is Marc exhibiting aspects of what we’ve been calling ‘turn-around’ pedagogies.

Marc’s Home Visit to Willem

In the first two weeks of term one, Willem struggled to settle in, both with fellow students … and with the work load, which he struggled to start and rarely completed. It became apparent that Willem was simply disinterested in the set work. He had little motivation toward reading books from the provided book boxes, he sat back in his chair and allowed himself to be distracted, he never completed writing tasks and he showed very little enthusiasm toward joining in with ‘Learning Centre’ activities. This was all about to change.

On the second day of school I sent each student home with my timetable and a note to their parents explaining how I would like to meet with each of them within the first few weeks. In the letter I explained how much I would value such a meeting and listed some of the benefits I expected would be gained. I provided the parents with a choice of meeting at school during my time release, before school at 8:00am, after school until 6:00pm or alternatively meeting in their own home after school. I received a terrific response from parents with 3 time-release meetings, 11 after hour school meetings and 8 home visits – a total of 22 out of 27 possible meetings. Willem’s parents extended an invitation to their home.

Arriving at Willem’s house on the Wednesday afternoon of the 3rd week and stepping foot on their front lawn, gave me more insight into Willem’s virtual schoolbag than all the time I had spent with Willem at school during the first two weeks. The simple sight of his home and the surrounding neighbourhood, told its own story. There I saw two teenage boys slouching around on the front veranda, watching two other young teens kicking a soccer ball to each other along the driveway; none of them seemed to mind my presence nor did they query my intentions.

The front door was open but after knocking and waiting for a minute, one of the boys on the veranda told me just to go in. A little hesitant, I called out and walked in. Gwen soon heard me calling and we met in the foyer area as Willem came rushing in to welcome me. As I was led through to the kitchen area I could not help but notice that most of the rooms were festooned with black and yellow ornaments – recognisable Richmond Tigers in signature.

When sitting down to a cool drink at the kitchen bench, I observed several more teenagers and a few young adults, walking through or just hanging around. Gwen clarified that Willem was the youngest of four boys (not all the boys I saw belonged to her) and his eldest brother plays for the Richmond reserves. The whole family thrives on the game of AFL and the boys constantly have a few of their local footy team mates over, so that at any given time, there are between 10 and 15 people in the house. The day I visited, Gwen had prepared for 14 people to stay that night – but this was not unusual.

The walls of Willem’s room were covered in black and yellow posters and … But the biggest surprise was an autobiography of one of Richmond’s player/coaches resting on the bedside chest of drawers. Willem informed me that he was reading this book. I asked whether he could read some of it to me and although he could not read all the words, his great enthusiasm for learning the content, led to an obvious determination to decipher elements of the text. He was able to recite important dates of games and scores and tell me who Richmond played against, all by piecing the text together.

What an eye opener! Before the start of week four, I took Willem to the library and together we selected books that he might be interested in reading during ‘book box’ time. We were in the sports section but for
every three books about cricket, AFL and soccer, I chose one book that I wanted Willem to read – it was a deal!...

From our perspective, the home visit provided a site for Marc to turn around and see Willem differently. What had changed Marc’s mind about home visits? There is no simple answer. A year’s participation in our cross-generational research community? Surviving the first year of teaching? Reading about Moll’s (2000) funds of knowledge and Thomson’s (2002) virtual schoolbags?

Marc’s case study
The home visit, however, was a first and crucial step in Marc’s case study of Willem. He spent many weeks during term one also doing a thorough analysis of Willem’s reading and writing behaviours – conducting running records, analysing his word recognition skills and writing samples, observing him closely in school and playground contexts.

In the first research workshop this year when we prepared Marc and the other teachers to conduct their case study observations, we stressed the importance of asking new questions about how the child operates in literacy and disrupting their normal ways of viewing as teachers. Marc took up the challenge and in an incredibly short period of time began to ‘turn around’ his own way of viewing Willem. Of particular interest to us was the way he began to create new situations where Willem could function more productively in the classroom. We’ll try to illustrate, very briefly, the impact on Willem by looking at a few samples of his writing and how these changed over a very short period of time.

This is an early example of Willem’s diary writing in February, before Marc’s home visit.

February
I liked fineing the snake sing and it saw yag.

One of the things Marc learned from his case study observations was that Willem was happy to write in his diary, as long as his errors weren’t picked up and corrected. So Marc stopped making corrections and the length of Willem’s writing began to increase. These two texts were written by Willem in March, a month after the home visit.

March 31
I like to play football at the park and I like to see Richmond and Win and I hop it is fun and I am going to set it up the top or the stad and it is fun.

March 30
Luke got a PlayStation 2 and Kieren played soccer. Shantell changed her room around and Andrew played football. Kirsty stayed up late and Kadijah had visitors.

Not only has the length of Willem’s writing increased, but traces of Marc’s home visit are visible in the sense that Willem is now willing to write about going to the football and about events at home with his ‘extended’ family – because his teacher has valued his lifeworld outside school in a significant way.

Marc also used Willem’s football passion to move him into writing other genres. Here is Willem’s football commentary which he completed writing toward the end of May.

Willem’s football commentary
At the third quarter bounce the tigers are ahead, 10.3.63 and Collingwood are only 2.2.14. Trailing by 49 points the magpies do not have a chance against the Richmond. Darren Gaspar taps the ball down to Campbell. Wayne Campbell, 4 time best and fairest, handballs to Rodan. David Rodan runs on as Brad Ottens shepherds Nathan Buckley. The 2002 AFL rising star, Rodan boots one long from 60 metres out. The pack comes together right in front of goals. Richardson sticks his boot into Cloak’s back. He launches in the air and takes a mark! The crowd goes wild as superstar Mark Richardson lines up for his sixth goal. The scoreboard will now be 11.3.69. Richmond is killing Collingwood!

This piece of writing started with Willem commentating a football match between Richmond and Collingwood by pretending to ‘call’ a game into a microphone. Using a computer program called TEXTEASE Willem was able to play back his voice and type his commentary onto the computer. As he typed each word, the program would speak it back to him, allowing him to hear spelling mistakes and correct them until it sounded right. Once his basic commentary was completed he worked with Marc to add his knowledge of each player into the text and do simple editing – although he was able to edit most of the work himself through playing back what he had written.

Willem was thrilled with his achievement – so was Marc – extraordinary progress in a very short period of time – and from our point of view a clear instance of ‘turning around’, reconnecting and overcoming some of the fear and anxiety that often builds up around years of failure, even in the second year of school.
Marc's redesign

Marc's work with Willem informed his curriculum redesign – his desire to keep Willem motivated and moving ahead, but also to engage all of his students differently. Starting from students' individual interests, Marc produced a radio program with his Grade 2 class which he described like this:

If I'd said, 'Let's do a radio program,' no-one would have taken it on. I decided to start with something they really loved and ask them to tell me about it. This generated so much enthusiasm for their various passions that I felt as if I needed to harness this somehow, let them teach me.

For Marc, the radio program was a way to get the students writing and really thinking about their writing. He planned an integrated unit, which combined the study of electronics, sound recording technologies, oracy, radio genres and script writing. Students built radio resistors and microphones and researched what's involved in producing a radio program. They listened to radio programs and analysed the language, they wrote scripts for advertisements, sports programs, radio station promos and competitions, and they rehearsed the presentation of their various segments; moving from the written to the oral and back again. With the assistance of a special education teacher, students rehearsed and individually recorded their segments onto a laptop and will be broadcasting their program to the whole school at the beginning of next term. Using Adobe software they will also produce a CD of the program, which each student will take home with them at the end of the unit.

We think there are a number of key elements in Marc's case study and redesign that can be teased out:

1. Marc was informed by his growing knowledge of the way Willem lived his life and the family's investments in football
2. With this came respect rather than judgement
3. He used this knowledge as a springboard to think differently about literacy curriculum
4. Willem's negotiated task – writing the football commentary for radio – elicited a powerful idea for a whole class pedagogy
5. The dynamic everyday language practices of radio became the object of study for the whole class
6. The students investigated the medium itself
7. They began to learn new literacies/ textual practices (making a radio segment) with reference to familiar and preferred knowledges and practices (e.g. football)
8. They were working as individuals towards a collective orchestrated performance and learning to use new computer mediated technologies to record and produce a CD of that performance
9. The project had a coherence as students were investigating and producing a working language site, but also allowed variety of symbolic, representational and linguistic resources to be used and pooled.

Not only were the students turned around by this re-design, but Marc also began to look at Willem and his peers differently. In a sense, his pedagogical vision had been altered. He had turned around to Willem and his family. As a result, he saw him as a very different pedagogical subject than he had previously. In Heath's words (Heath & Mangiola 1991) Willem is seen as a 'child of promise' and his family as 'resourceful' (McNaughton 2002) rather than as deficit or neglectful.

Marc was not the only teacher who 'turned around'. His colleague Ethan along with others in the teacher-researcher group in SA and Victoria enjoyed similar experiences, which we are in the process of analysing collectively. When they took time to consider closely what was going on and what was going wrong – at school – for particular children they were able to make adjustments to their classroom pedagogies and curriculum designs.

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III

English teaching as a site for pedagogical work – Turn-around pedagogies for at risk kids and their teachers

As a result of studying a child whose literacy they were worried about, teachers began to design a curriculum/pedagogical project that they thought might build on the child's funds of knowledge and interests and re-connect them in significant ways with the world of school literacies. Because the teachers have just completed the first term of their pedagogical project and will continue to pursue it in term three, the stories we have told are necessarily provisional and incomplete. Yet, we believe there are some important principles in the teachers' approaches and in almost every case they have been highly effective with the particular children to an amazing degree.

The children (and their teachers) have been turned around by the changed pedagogies, which have:

- reconnected students with textual practices and representational work
• reconnected students with schooling through communication work
• reconnected students with learning school knowledge through positive identity work.

We have been reflecting on the conditions that made this kind of 'turning around' possible for the teachers in our project. After all, it is not new to encourage teachers to research their classroom literacy practices. As a profession, we have been doing this internationally since at least the 70s and we know that teacher research can have very beneficial effects on classroom practice. It is also not new to ask older teachers to work with younger teachers so they can benefit from their accumulated practice wisdom. Traditional mentoring practices underlie most student teacher training programs in our universities. And in our pre-conference strand discussion, we were informed about an innovative program in a NSW school where new teachers are given time and space to ask their own questions, set the agendas and get help from older teachers with the questions they most need help with.

But we would argue that in structuring our cross generational teacher research community across two states, and across the primary, secondary and university sectors, we did something quite different which we provisionally try to summarise here as creating the conditions for 'turning around'. This involved creating new discursive spaces and a sustained, historicised research-based discussion with teachers – which disrupted the 'normal' positions of power and authority for teachers. This involved a number of moves.

1. We repositioned all teachers, both early career and late career, as central informants on and researchers of the recurrent problem of unequal outcomes in literacy. While literacy is a significant economic and political issue and arguably the core business of education, there is a striking absence of research which takes central account of teachers' perspectives. In order to produce new insights on the problem of inequitable outcomes in literacy, our research design positioned teachers 'inside' research as tellers and knowers – both producers and builders of professional knowledge (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993).

2. We disrupted discourses of blame that attend literacy failure. We not only challenged teachers' tendency to blame parents, but took away the individual blame from teachers for their failure to connect with students. That is, we framed the comparatively low performance of low-socio-economic and marginal groups of children as a collective socio/political and global problem with new dimensions in new times that make it even harder to intervene. And we structured every interaction in our research workshops in terms of how we might work on this problem together. Not that teachers are bad or ineffective, but that the problem is old and persistent and in need of new energy and new intellectual work.

3. We disrupted generational hierarchies in teacher mentoring, where it is always the younger teacher who has a problem that the older teacher can help them solve. Even when young teachers themselves set the agenda and take more agency in seeking the advice they need, the old knowledge hierarchies stay in place. In our project all teachers had problems – building a repertoire of literacy practice and pedagogy was seen as a life long project. And the way we structured the cross generational interviews allowed a kind of vulnerability, analysis and reciprocity that laid the foundation for all future interactions. Older teachers struggled as did younger ones – the struggles were different but no less distressing or pressing – especially in disadvantaged schools.

4. We documented histories of a profession in ways that made them USEABLE by new generations of teachers. We attended to history but this was an historicised-cross generational storytelling that allowed older teachers a kind of reflective distance they are not often asked to take publicity and younger teachers a way to understand the struggles and initiatives of the present in the context of a past – not springing full blown out of the latest guru's head or some government curriculum document.

5. We paid close attention to the language teachers use and tried to move beyond dominant teacher education discourses of sharing and reflecting. Of course, our discussions in the research workshops were reflective. We talked about what kids did and what teachers did and the effects. So yes, teachers shared their stories. But we also positioned our teachers as analysts and designers. We have noted a unfortunate tendency in some teacher research projects to use teachers as data collectors or as writers of little classroom action vignettes. Our aim
has been to engage teachers more fully in all parts of the research. Not only to conduct interviews, but to analyse their own and each other's ways of talking. Not only to critique classroom practice, but to redesign curriculum in order to reconnect with at risk kids. This notion of design and redesign rests on agency. As Gunther Kress says: 'design proceeds on the basis of a full knowledge of the resources available to the designer and the capacity of the designer to assemble these materials' (2000, p.140) in ways that will make a difference.

— IV —

Conclusion

In this keynote address, we have tried to take a hard line on the material changes of the present that impact in real ways on teachers' work, especially with disadvantaged young people, whilst maintaining our optimism about what can be accomplished by teachers and young people in schooling. We've explored the new English teacher – what their work is like, what their kids are like and how they understand their pedagogies.

In the process we are struggling to find new metaphors and new ways of understanding that go beyond teacher development and teacher professionalism – and that emphasise the social, cultural and political nature of the job. The teachers we are working with are redesigning pedagogies, but they are working in the local, albeit in increasingly politicised ways.

We are now thinking about Allan Luke's (2003) metaphor of the 'cosmopolitan teacher' and what it might mean for the teachers we are working with in terms of moving between the local and the global or 'teaching beyond but within the nation.' There is a lot more work to do, but as we continue this project we imagine we will have quite a lot to say about the importance of cross generational dialogue and labour to foster productive identity work for English teachers in new times.

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