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*Promoting dialogue in secondary English classrooms about
current issues in the media: exploring the experiences of
teachers in Victoria, Australia*

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BA(Hons), MTeach

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Abstract

English teachers can play a powerful role in helping their students navigate complex global challenges as informed and critical citizens. One of the major obstacles facing citizens in countries like Australia today is a deterioration in public discourse around current issues. Fuelled by misinformation, polarisation and culture wars, many people are unwilling or unable to engage in informed and considered dialogue with those they disagree with. Given their subject focus on literacy and communication, English teachers are in a unique position to address this problem. In this context, the aim of this study was to understand how secondary English teachers in Victoria, Australia, promote dialogue in their classrooms about current issues in the media. To address this question, the study adopted a reflexive thematic analysis of data generated through interviews and a focus group of six secondary English and English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers in Victoria, Australia.

The study's findings suggest that English teachers who promote classroom dialogue about current issues in the media have a democratically empowering vision of their work. Through reports of practice, the study also found that the nature of classroom dialogue appears to be unique to each context and teacher, and that dialogic spaces for respectfully sharing views about current issues are constructed through the multidimensional work teachers perform. Moreover, two of the challenges that participating teachers reported were dealing with hesitation to participate in classroom dialogue as well as their students' ingrained views. In seeking to address these challenges, the teachers emphasised the importance of sensitively probing students' thinking, building background knowledge as well as finding ways to remove the personal implication of participation. Taken together, the study's findings are significant because they illuminate the ways that classroom dialogue is shaped by not only the classroom context and teachers involved but also the broader social and political forces that bear down on schools. The findings also demonstrate that English teachers continue to carry out important ethical work in spite of neoliberal attempts to narrow and de-politicise the scope and nature of their work.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, or any use of generative artificial intelligence technologies, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Foreword

It has almost become a truism to describe the world today as divided. Many people are turning away from each other precisely at the moment they desperately need to turn to each other in order to address the major ecological, social and financial problems facing the world today. This thesis started by asking questions about the discussions teachers have with their students about news. As the interviews and focus group unfolded, though, it became clear that the study was in fact about much more than just news or 'talk'. It was clear that the conversations the participating teachers reported having and facilitating with students were promoting dialogic ways of thinking about the world and relating to others that fostered the sort of robust and inclusive public discourse we need today. This thesis highlights the important democratic work that English teachers perform today, in the hope that this work will continue and will matter tomorrow.

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List of abbreviations

ACARA – Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

ACE – Australian Curriculum: English

AITSL – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

ALEA – Australian Literacy Educators' Association

EAL – English as an additional language

IB – International Baccalaureate

NAPLAN – National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy

VCE – Victorian Certificate of Education

PART A

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The polis, properly speaking, is not a city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. (Arendt, 2018, p. 198)

1.1 Why this study?

All research has a story. The story of this study began to take shape in early 2021 when I visited my brother in Tasmania. At the time, the Australian Government had just started rolling out COVID vaccines, and Victoria, where I was living at the time, had just concluded the third of what would be six lockdowns. It was well into one evening when we began to talk about current issues. It was an activity we had inherited from our father – a primary school teacher who had worked for decades in a disadvantaged area of Hobart. Dad loved nothing more than to talk politics at the kitchen table. Mum was never one for politics or debate, but she valued learning and knowledge in her own way. After being labelled as ‘too slow’ as a young pupil in post-war England, she returned to school 40 years later as a migrant on the other side of the world in Australia. I can still remember the lively conversations Mum had with her literacy tutor at our kitchen table as she learned to write about her daily life, from a simple recount of the weekend’s activities to a long shopping list for a family of nine. With these experiences in the family home, I came to appreciate the power of literacy and interaction for both life and learning.

Out on the deck of his rental looking over the waters we once fished as boys, my brother and I landed on the issue of climate change. At once, we came across what seemed to be an insurmountable obstacle: my brother expressed doubts about the existence of climate change while I insisted to the contrary. Yet we persisted in asking probing questions of each other and offering our views, and as the night went on, the conversation shifted and so did the language we used. Instead of talking about climate change itself and using the lines and slogans we had inherited from the media, we began to

speak in broader terms about environmental pollution. Here, we found common ground – the effects of environmental degradation were clear to us both. Building on this, and to my astonishment, we both found ourselves agreeing on the need for more funding for green industries in Australia. A change in framing and language had revealed an important point of agreement. While we could not agree on climate change, through a patient back and forth, we were able to unlock a meaningful consensus about the need to create a sustainable future for the planet.

I have come to realise since then that in our own way, my brother and I were engaging in dialogue. Not dialogue in a formal, professional or diplomatic sense, but in a relatable, everyday sense of the word – what Riddle and Apple aptly call the “thick democracy of daily life” (Riddle & Apple, 2019, p. 2). Although we live very different lives, we found points of agreement through the way we interacted with each other. In word and gesture, there was a respectful back and forth, a searching for understanding and common ground, a willingness to sit with a point of disagreement and explore different angles, a capacity to reframe our ideas in different terms, and yes – some desire to persuade the other without the rancour or competitiveness of an adversarial debate. The exchange moved me deeply when it happened, and it still lingers with me today. Recalling it, from time to time as now, has prompted me as an English teacher and researcher to think about the educational possibilities that flow from teaching young people the transformational potential of engaging in dialogue about current issues. The ability to do so would seem especially important in light of the global challenges they face as global citizens today.

1.2 A growing crisis in democracy

In Australia, school education is explicitly linked to the growth of young people as citizens. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration – a national policy document regarding education in Australia – makes the case that schooling in Australia should help students become “active and informed members of the community” (Education Council, 2019, p. 6). As a result of their education, young people should be able to “understand their responsibilities as global citizens and know how to affect positive change”

(Education Council, 2019, p. 6). In a range of other policy and curriculum documents, these broad aims are reflected in official statements that are relevant to the teaching of English. For example, a national curriculum document, Australian Curriculum: English (ACE), envisages a subject that fosters “confident communicators, imaginative thinkers and informed citizens” (ACARA, 2021b, para. 1). Seen in this way, the success of education in Australia can be gauged by how empowered young people are to tackle the social and political challenges they face today.

Clearly, young people face significant and stark democratic challenges. As global citizens, teachers and young people need to navigate an increasingly unstable, uncertain world full of crises (Aly et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2021; White et al., 2024). The problems democratic societies like Australia face are significant. Riddle (2022b) has argued that the challenges include “economic inequality, growing political instability and geopolitical conflict, rapid urbanisation and the depletion of waterways and food sources, globalisation, pandemics, [and] collapsing ecosystems” (p. 17). Worryingly, these problems come at a time when democracy and liberalism are in retreat across the globe (Aly et al., 2022; Riddle & Apple, 2019). With a view to the global challenges the world faces today, the Secretary General of the United Nations António Guterres has called for increasing solidarity and cooperation. He has underlined the importance of “working together, recognizing that we are bound to each other and that no community or country can solve its challenges alone.” (UN Secretary General, 2021, p. 14).

Crucially, working together means identifying and talking about problems together. Certainly there are questions about whether some public conversations are always or genuinely warranted¹. Where a public conversation is warranted though, this study recognises that engaging in forms of public dialogue is, or at least ought to be, a hallmark of democratic societies. From the point of view of participative and

¹ An example of this is prominent right-wing UK politician, Nigel Farage’s call for a “proper debate” about immigration. See Farage, N. [@Nigel_Farage]. (2024, August 5, 2024). *Parliament must be recalled for a proper debate*X. His call came in the wake of riots in the UK in late July and early August 2024 which were fuelled in large part by misinformation and islamophobia. See McDonald, A., & Boycott-Owen, M. (2024, August 6, 2024). UK far-right riots: Everything we know. *Politico*.

deliberative approaches to democracy, which this study promotes, the exchange of ideas between citizens matters (Sant, 2019). As Lepoutre argues, functioning democracies involve “inclusive public speech”, which involves “people from all walks of life bringing forward their concerns, revealing their experiences, denouncing unjust conventions, and demanding public justifications of others” (p. 1). Hannon (2023) terms this a “discursive conception of democracy” (p. 336) with citizens positioned as “de facto co-authors of public decisions” (Sant, 2019, p. 667). Arguably, these interactions need not be formal. Rather, they can occur in the sort of everyday political talk (Conover & Miller, 2018) that happens in schools, councils, community groups as well as online on social media, with friends, and around dinner tables with family. These open and critical exchanges about public life hold out the promise of a “participatory democracy as based in daily practices in all parts of our lives as we interact with other individuals to create a more responsive and equal ‘we’” (p. 2).

These interactions matter for the flourishing of democracy and for social change. From a political point of view, dialogue about current issues can shape how people vote and thus the decisions taken by governments. They also have epistemological and moral importance. Hearing from diverse groups of people can help draw attention to problems in society and generate sound policy ideas, and the practice of communicating about public issues serves as a protection against arbitrary rule and domination (Lepoutre, 2021). In addition, from the perspective of bringing about social change, it is through reflexive dialogue that people can come to name the injustices around them (Freire, 1972) and thereby start to enact change.

And yet, while it would seem that it has never been more important to engage in thoughtful and measured public dialogue to collectively navigate and address the environmental, social and economic issues that impact communities, it would seem that many people are increasingly unwilling to do so. In fact, in many cases it would seem that quite the opposite is happening. The toxic state of affairs was summed up by the Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese, in the wake of an assassination

attempt on then Presidential candidate, Donald Trump, in July, 2024. Drawing attention to problems in Australia, he (Albanese, 2024) remarked:

We must lower [the] temperature of debate. There is nothing to be served by some of the escalation of rhetoric that we see in some of our political debate, political discourse in the democratic world.

It's a phenomenon that's not unique to the United States...I've been talking for a long period of time about people having conflict fatigue in this country...There's a lot of shouting going on. (para's 3 – 9)

Echoing what would seem to be a common sentiment, some (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019) have described the state of public discourse today as “miserable” (p. 13). Lepoutre (2021) puts it this way: “in place of orderly argument, we find a public sphere saturated with emotional appeals, including intensely negative emotions such as rage and resentment. Instead of mutual respect, public speakers routinely use their airtime to ridicule, demean, or vilify others” (p. 2). Hannon (2023) has called this state of play, “defective public discourse” (p. 337). Put simply, many people seem unwilling to give time and space to engaging a respectful, considered and open dialogue with those whose views differ from their own.

Addressing this problematic breakdown in public discourse is the problem this project seeks to address.

This deterioration in the quality of public discourse has relational, cognitive and political dimensions – being fuelled by polarisation, misinformation and culture wars. In recent times, there has been a clear increase in polarisation in democratic societies (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). The polarities in society today include not only left vs right but also traditional vs modern, globalist vs nationalist, religious vs secular, or more recently people vs elites (McCoy et al., 2018). The reduction of diversity along these sorts of single cleavages has created a dangerous *us vs them* dynamic between groups in society with ideological differencing spilling over into the realm of relationships and identity (Barnes, 2022; Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018). Accompanying the clear demarcation of rival camps is also the sense of mutually exclusive competing agendas, such that for each party everything seems to be on the line in what McCoy et al. (2018) describe as a “zero sum game”. With identities and interests on the line,

it is little wonder that scholars have signalled the deleterious consequences that polarisation has for liberal societies (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019).

Clear examples of polarisation and its consequences exist around the world. Most notable perhaps is the case of the tone of public discourse in the United States – with no better example than Trump's divisive rhetoric (McCoy et al., 2018). While Australia does not appear to have the same level of political polarisation as the United States (Kousser, 2020), there are clear worrying signs of social fracturing which impact the way people interact with each other. In a recent major report, a significant majority of Australians reported their unwillingness to help, live near or work with someone who held opposing views to them (Edelman, 2023). A degree of social breakdown is also evident in well-established downwards trends in the public's sense of connection and belonging to the nation (O'Donnell, 2023). There are tangible consequences of these signs of social fracturing. At a national level, Zheng and Bhatt (2022) argue that political polarisation around the causes and management of devastating bushfires in Australia in 2019-20 has led to a lack of substantive action to tackle bushfires in the future. At a school level, some teachers in Australia are reluctant to teach about climate change because of perceived negative backlash from parents and the wider community (Payne, 2024).

Extreme differences in opinion today are also evidence of the impact of online 'echo chambers' in which people engage only with information that confirms their own beliefs (Ranalli & Malcom, 2023). The proliferation of misinformation (Weismueller et al., 2024) or 'fake news' is a phenomenon which researchers have described as a "socio-technological disease" (Victoria, 2019, p. 1022) and an unfortunate "mainstay in public life" (Bradshaw et al., 2021, p. 22). The impacts of misinformation and the algorithms help spread them over recent years are manifest in doubts about the nature of COVID-19; resistance to vaccines and lockdowns; a rise in 'sovereign citizen' groups in Australia who reject the legitimacy of the state (Sibthorpe, 2023), as well as delays in action to save the planet from rising temperatures (IPCC, 2022). In other cases, misinformation in the form of conspiracy theories has

physical impacts on people's lives – such as serving a xenophobic pretext for the massacre of worshippers at a mosque in Christchurch by an Australian (Dearden, 2019). More recently, two police officers were brutally shot dead in a rural property in Queensland by a group of people including two former teachers – an act since identified as religious terrorism fuelled in part by online engagement with conspiracy theories (Lavelle, 2024). These examples are not cited as evidence to mean that all Australians peddle and believe conspiracy theories, but they are cause for introspection about the extreme views held by some within the community.

Complicating questions of who and what to believe are concerns about what people feel they can say to others in the context of broader culture wars. Western societies are experiencing a backlash against shifting values (Inglehart & Norris, 2019), and there are battle lines around discussions of issues such as race, sexuality and gender. Teachers and students are inevitably caught up in these debates and concerned about what they can and cannot say. In this context, 'cancel culture' has particular salience today. In her analysis of cancel culture in the media, Ng (2022) distinguishes between cancelling practices and discourses. For Ng (2022), cancelling practices include removing support for someone or something through targeting individuals or organisations through social media posts, unfollowing someone online, or ceasing to purchase goods from particular brands. One widely broadcast example of this collective attempt to ostracise a prominent individual is the documented threats of violence and burning of copies of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series after she was accused of making transphobic comments (BBC, 2023; Nolan, 2020).

Fears about being 'cancelled' or 'de-platformed' have led some to express concerns about the state of open public debate and inquiry. A famous open letter by academics in *Harper's Magazine* reiterates that the "free exchange of information and ideas" is "the lifeblood of a liberal society" ("A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," 2020, para. 2). In this vein, Gordon (2022) argues that cancel culture involves the "suppression of dissenting views and the avoidance of engaging with opposing perspectives" (p. 17).

If this were the case, he (Gordon, 2022) argues that it represents a danger to education inasmuch as a culture of cancelling in schools would lead to students and teachers becoming narrow-minded. Moreover, where students and teachers self-censure for fear of backlash, some viewpoints ultimately remain unshared in what is akin to a 'spiral of silence' (Journell, 2017; Noelle-Neumann, 1984). This leads to an underrepresentation of what people really think. As a result, Gordon (2022) argues, cancel culture may also lead to a disconcerting acceptance of a fabricated consensus about various topics and issues in schools.

Yet these fears have been stoked to fever pitch by conservative commentators and politicians in a way that the language of cancel culture has become an important cultural signifier of conservative political identity. Ng (2022) argues that since 2020 (the year of George Floyd's death and the second impeachment of then President Trump), conservatives in the United States in particular have mobilised the phrase as signifier for an "attack on core American values and identity" (p. 74). In this way, for conservatives, the use of terms such as 'cancel culture,' or 'woke' serves to identify a common foe – 'the left'. This usage is echoed in Australia, where conservative thinkers associate cancel culture with what they see as the continuation of culture wars waged by the 'cultural-left' on institutions such as schools (Donnelly, 2021). In essence then, in the context of an ideological struggle, any action or speech can be derided or dismissed as an example of cancel culture if it falls foul of a socially conservative agenda.

In short, many feel beleaguered by misinformation, division and concerns about finding oneself in the cross-hairs of culture wars, and these factors undermine the ability of the public to engage in the sort of open and informed dialogue that is central to a thriving democratic society (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021). For educators, Alexander (2019) described the current moment in terms of "cultural crisis" which involves a "widening chasm" (p. 4) of discourses between ways of thinking and communicating that students encounter inside and outside the classroom. He laments the "raucous free-for-all of social media ... the reduction of judgemental nuance to the binary "like"/"dislike" [and]

the trolling and abuse that for many people have replaced discussion and debate” (p. 4). While it may be idealistic or romantic to envisage rational public discourse, this study recognises the particularly grim state of affairs highlighted by the writers cited above. Given the futures and livelihoods at stake, it is vital to address this deterioration in public dialogue and proactively creates spaces for dialogue and the facilitation of dialogic ways of thinking, relating and acting with others about issues of public concern which play out in the media from day to day. This study sets out to do just that.

The project aims for an educational response to the current crisis in public discourse. This is because education in the service of democracy has transformational potential (Riddle & Apple, 2019). Put another way, Arendt (1958) argued that the authority of teachers rests on their “assumption of responsibility for the world” (p. 9). In this way, education can be thought of as an act of social and political renewal. This involves not only showing students what *is* but also what *can be*. Young people in classrooms are entering a world where the norms of public speech are to ‘slam,’ ‘smash,’ ‘roast’ or ‘destroy’ others – as evidenced in the titles of countless YouTube videos. Swept up in such online cultures, young people may be seen to lack sufficient models of empathetic, informed and rational communication that I argue are characteristic of active citizens who can address the issues that face their communities (Education Council, 2019).

1.3 What can English teachers do?

In light of the challenges democracies face today, some have argued that schools as they stand are not fit for purpose in preparing students for the collective challenges they face (UNESCO, 2021). Three years ago, a UN report, *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education* (UNESCO, 2021), called for a “new social contract for education” (p. 3), which in part involves reimagining classrooms as spaces in which teachers facilitate cooperation, collaboration and “foster intellectual, social, and moral capacities of students to work together and transform the world with empathy and compassion” (p. 4). Teaching students to work together in this way starts with communication. In the

context of polarisation, McCoy et al. (2018) argue that “communication and social interaction are at the heart of crystallisation of polarizing opinions, worldviews, and identities” (p. 24). To address the deterioration of public discourse, young people need opportunities to develop productive ways of speaking and relating to others. For educators committed to the future of democratic societies such as Australia, it is important to model and facilitate opportunities for students to engage with different perspectives in an informed and constructive manner.

The study adopts the view that English has always been a place where such teaching students to engage in challenging dialogues can and ought to take place (Riddle, 2022a). The connection between democratic citizenship and literacy is not new. The Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) holds that one of the aims of English teaching in Australia is the development of “powerfully literate citizens” (AATE, 2007, p. 16). Moreover, the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA) defines literacy in part as the ability to “pose, explore and respond flexibly to local, national and global issues, problems and challenges” (ALEA, 2023, p. 1).

In addition to statements from these professional bodies, this study draws on a long tradition of English teaching in both Australia and the UK which underlines the importance of connecting questions of literacy to political life. As discussed further in chapter two, opportunities for dialogue about texts and social issues is at the heart of critical literacy in Australia (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Morgan, 1997). From a Freirean view (Freire, 1972), English teachers have a special role to play (Barton et al., 2024) in teaching students to read the word and the world – which assumes critically reading and exchanging views about texts with a view to talk about how those texts work in the world. Going back further, the project also draws inspiration from progressive educators and thinkers in post-war UK such as Barnes, John Dixon, Harold Rosen, James Britton and Nancy Martin who promoted the importance of classroom interaction and centring the lives of students and their experiences and cultural resources (Barnes, 1976; Dixon, 1969; Gibbons, 2017; Medway et al., 2014).

In practice, there are a multitude opportunities in English classrooms in Australia for dialogue about current issues. They might be long or short-lived, planned or spontaneous, built into a unit or occurring in response to students' interests and questions. This project focuses on the Australian context, and as part of a broader curriculum picture, the Australian Curriculum and senior secondary curriculums specify contexts for these discussions of current issues. These include engagement with media representation of current events within the 'Literacy' strand of the Australian Curriculum: *English* (ACE). For example, the upper secondary curriculum sets out to develop students' "critical understanding of the contemporary media" (ACARA, 2022d para. 3). In years nine and ten, students are expected to look carefully at the construction and representation of issues, people, situations and events and are encouraged to think about the values and purposes shaping these representations. Several elaborations within the 'Literacy' strand for these year levels suggest "debating the reliability of the coverage in a range of news media of a contentious issue," as well as "analysing the ways socio-cultural values, attitudes and beliefs are presented in texts by comparing the ways that news is reported." At a senior secondary level, students in the state of Victoria (where I reside) learn to analyse language and argument as part of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) English curriculum. In essence, this involves deconstructing the features of persuasive texts (e.g., opinion pieces and editorials) in relation to relevant contemporary issues. In both secondary and senior secondary levels then, it is likely that students of English will engage at some level with current issues.

The nature and extent of classroom dialogue associated with the study of these issues remains a point of interest – especially in light of the regulatory pressures that teachers work with. English teachers in Australia are under immense pressure to focus on preparing students for test performance, and research has shown that secondary English teachers are narrowing what they do in classrooms to boost test results (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020; Polesel et al., 2014). As a result, scholars like Carter et al. (2018) and Brown et al. (2021) warn of a decline in English teacher agency and ability to respond

authentically to their students. Alongside this, recent examples of attempts by school administrators and politicians to shut down a teacher from talking to students about the war in Gaza in a Melbourne high school (Eddie, 2023; Khairat, 2023) illustrate concerning attempts to separate teaching and literacy from larger social and political questions. It would seem that teachers not only face challenges in the classroom when it comes to managing and facilitating discussions about current issues, they also potentially face community and professional pressures to keep quiet about issues construed as ‘political’ (Geller, 2020; Journell, 2022).

Clearly then, there are potential personal and professional risks and dilemmas associated with classroom dialogue about current issues. That is to say that sort of important ethical work involved in facilitating democratic dialogue in English classrooms is challenging. Taken together, there is great value in research that seeks to better understand how English teachers promote dialogue about issues in the media today and what drives them to do so.

1.4 Research aims and questions

In sum, the problem this project seeks to address is how English teachers can prepare their students as young citizens to deal with the seeming deterioration in informed and empathetic public discourse about current social and political issues playing out in the media. I argue that English teachers can play a key role in creating space for students to talk about current issues and in doing so teach students how to engage in productive dialogue with others. While such teaching is important and relevant, the participants in this study show that it may often be difficult to enact in classrooms today due to a range of social and professional pressures. In this context, my study seeks to generate a better understanding of the interactions that secondary English and English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teachers have and facilitate with their students about current issues. Underlying the research is the assumption that such conversations are rich teaching and learning opportunities to build world knowledge, foster critical thinking and develop communication skills (Juzwik et al., 2013; Teo, 2019).

These skills are particularly relevant in secondary contexts given the proximity of students to voting age in Australia.

While many teachers across different curriculum areas around the world report having or wanting to have conversations with their students about current events and issues (Barton et al., 2024; Bomford, 2019; Fadel & Preston, 2017; Peterson, 2020), relatively little is known about how English teachers in Australia engage in this practice. Given the limited empirical research, the nature of this study is 'bottom-up' and exploratory, and I aim to generate 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of teachers' beliefs and reported practices. In so doing, I address the following main and three subsidiary research questions:

Main question: How do secondary English teachers in Australia promote classroom dialogue about current issues in the media?

Subsidiary questions:

1. How do English teachers who promote dialogue about current issues conceptualise their work?
2. From a practical perspective, how do teachers generate classroom dialogue about current issues?
3. What challenges do those teachers encounter, and how do they address these?

1.5 Outline of the thesis

In responding to these questions, this thesis will proceed as follows. First, in what remains of Part A, I will review the relevant literature in relation to English teaching and citizenship, educational dialogue in English classrooms, as well as classroom approaches to current issues in the media. Having reviewed the relevant literature, in the methodology chapter, I will outline my theoretical framework for analysing practices of teachers. Drawing on the work primarily of Wegerif (2007, 2011, 2024) and Lefstein and

Snell (2013), I conceptualise the promotion of dialogue about current issues as the attempt to open a dialogic space— a space of possibilities (Maine, 2015) – through which teachers can facilitate dialogic ways of relating to, thinking with, and engaging civically with others. Opening such spaces is crucial in directly addressing the deterioration in public discourse and polarisation outlined above – the assumption being that modelling, facilitating and encouraging such dialogue in classes will translate into democratically transformative interactions outside the classroom. After detailing my theoretical framework, I finish the methodology chapter by explaining my choice for a case study design, the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups to generate data, as well as the enacting of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2019b) to make sense of the data.

In Part B, I turn then turn to my findings – first to a brief introduction of to the social and political context for the period in which the data was generated, followed by three findings chapters. These three chapters explore the nine themes I constructed from the analysis of the data of reports of teacher practices. Following this, in Part C, I identify and discuss the five key overarching themes from my study and what they mean for English teaching today in Australia in particular. Finally, in the conclusion, I provide responses to the research questions, lay out recommendations and argue for the significance of this project in the concluding chapter. It is to the literature review that I now turn.

Chapter 2 – Literature review

The (English) lessons that are ‘for’ the things that really matter are organic, dynamic, protean and potentially vertiginously open-ended. (Bomford, 2019, p. 13)

2.1 Introduction

One of the questions this research project is wrestling with is the extent to which secondary English teaching (and by that I include English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) and ‘mainstream’ English²) can provide students with the education they need to respond to the complex challenges they face in democracies today (Aly et al., 2022; Riddle & Apple, 2019). It is wrestling with the very question of whether secondary English teaching can be, as Bomford writes, about the things that matter. In particular, in Chapter 1, I argued that one of the major challenges that young people as citizens face is the experience of growing up in a world where it seems increasingly difficult to engage in informed, empathetic and robust dialogue about contemporary issues with others due to the impact of political polarisation, misinformation and intensifying culture wars. In this context, I am interested in the ways that English teachers address this by encouraging and facilitating dialogic ways of engaging with others about current issues in the media in their classrooms. For these reasons, my main research question is: *How do secondary English teachers in Australia promote classroom dialogue about current issues in the media?*

² While there are some differences related to teaching dialogically between EAL/D and ‘mainstream’ English contexts (e.g., translanguaging, cultural cues etc.) which emerge in the findings, there are strong commonalities between the two in terms of the curriculum (i.e. study of media, issues and language) - especially at level of the senior curriculum in Victoria. It is for this reason that both subject areas are treated together for the purpose of this study.

In reviewing the literature, I argue that while potentially difficult to enact, such dialogues belong in English classrooms as much as they do in other subjects. In breaking this down further, I divide the review into two sub-sections. I start in section 2.1 by situating the teaching of current issues in the media in an English teaching context – defining what I mean by ‘current issues’ and locating the teaching of current issues within a democratic tradition of English teaching. I then turn in section 2.2 to reviewing the literature on educational dialogue and the features and challenges that are associated with enacting classroom dialogue in English teaching contexts. Throughout the review, I draw on and synthesise research from a range of fields such as media studies, the teaching of controversial issues, the history of English teaching, teacher professional identity and dialogic education.

2.2 Addressing current issues in English classrooms

This project aims to show how English teachers can promote dialogue in their classes about current issues in the media in ways that help students feel empowered to do the same as citizens. In this way, it is premised on the assumption that English classrooms can and should accommodate the discussion of current issues, and that there is a connection between English teaching and democratic education. In this section (2.2.1.), I outline what I mean by ‘current issues’ and review how current issues are typically taught. Going deeper, I then (2.2.2) locate the teaching of current issues in particular traditions of English teaching emerging from Australia and England which foregrounded students’ life worlds, oral communication and critical literacy. In drawing the project into the present, I highlight (2.2.3) the pressures on teachers which may well challenge their ability to engage in rich and important classroom conversations about the issues students see playing out in the media.

2.2.1 Teaching current issues

In setting up the parameters for this research project, I adopt a dictionary definition of a current issue as “an important subject that many people are discussing or thinking about at the present time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Typically, I argue that the ‘subject’ is usually a problem in society about

which there are a range of views (see VCAA, 2022), and which may or may not currently be the subject of political deliberation. As I outline at the start of Part B of this thesis, there were a range of issues that had particular prominence in the mainstream media in Australia over the span of this research project from 2020 – 2024. These included: the referendum on the Indigenous Voice to parliament; the war in Ukraine; the conflict in Gaza; the cost of living crisis; COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccination requirements; the treatment of women in the federal parliament; global responses to the climate change; the Royal Commissions into the Aged Care and disabilities sectors; Australia's defence and foreign policies in the Asia-Pacific region; the US Presidential elections; the plight of refugees (especially on the island of Nauru); the rise of right-wing extremism; and the emergence of fringe anti-government protest groups. This is in addition to countless local issues specific to states and council areas throughout the country.

In offering this definition, I make a distinction between current events and current issues – terms which are commonly blurred (Deniz & İzci, 2023; Hess, 2009a; LeCompte et al., 2017). While the two terms are interrelated (e.g., a report in the media can be about an issue) (Hess, 2009a), an issue implies a problem – not just something that happens or has happened. Unlike Hess (2009a), though, whose interest is understandably in political deliberation, I do not narrow my definition purely to disputes over policy. While current issues may relate to proposed legislation (e.g., bills related to pill testing at music concerts), in everyday life some issues anticipate a political process (e.g., what to do about male violence in society?). I likewise do not claim arbitrarily that some issues are more important to address than others (Hess, 2009a) – choosing to leave this judgement to the teachers and students. The effect of this broadening is that my definition acts as an umbrella for all sorts of sub strands of issues in the literature – controversial issues (Cassar et al., 2021; Hess, 2009a; Saetra, 2021; Wansink et al., 2023), sensitive issues (Gereluk, 2012), and social issues (Hulbert & Totten, 1992). The central distinguishing feature is that they have contemporary prominence in the media and among the public.

Crucially, these issues do not present themselves to the public – rather, the media, and especially news media, play a key role in drawing attention to and shaping public opinion about particular debates. News is essentially a social activity (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019) that helps people come to terms with their modern lives (Hartley, 1996). What emanates from news fabricates “common experience of the world” (Schudson, 2011, p. 5) that is highly contested (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). While mainstream media news channels continue to shape and frame the issues that people talk about today, young people are getting their news from new sources of media (Robertson, 2023). Arguably, access to these sources has an impact in expanding both the range of issues and the perspectives presented to them. Crucially, in an age of social media, young people are not mere passive recipients of news; they are both consumers and producers (Vaidhyanathan, 2017), and as such participate in the production and circulation of stories and opinions. As such, they have the power to draw attention to particular issues such as they have with the Student Strike 4 Climate Action protests over recent years (Taylor et al., 2019; Touma, 2023).

When issues are taught in the classroom, there are different strategies for doing so. Much of the pedagogical literature comes primarily from the field of teaching controversial issues. Ho et al. (2017) cite two such approaches which seem particularly suited to situations of entrenched division: conflict dialogue pedagogy and online collaboration. In the case of conflict dialogue pedagogy, studies from Northern Ireland (King, 2009; McCully, 2006) emphasise the importance of building trust and emotional bonds. As King (2009) argues, any ‘reasonable’ discussion between warring groups has to be preceded by establishing the ‘reasonableness’ of the people involved. This means allowing space for the expression of emotions and the development of caring relationships, in tandem with fostering critical self-reflection about one’s own worldview. In the case of online collaboration, a study of Israeli Jewish and Arab students (Pollack & Ben-David Kolikant, 2012) illustrates the value of different young people from opposing political communities writing together about a controversial historical issue. While the

participant teachers in this research do not necessarily come from warring communities, they do build relationships of trust in their classrooms and foster critical thinking in their own way.

By far the most common strategy in addressing controversial issues is classroom discussion (Hess, 2009a; Ho et al., 2017; Laughter et al., 2018; Saetra, 2021). Hand and Levinson (2012) argue that these discussions are useful in generating and appreciating multiple perspectives and the ways in which those opinions “are intertwined with people’s identities, affiliations and life experiences” (p. 616). In this way, the value of discussion can be found in helping students access information and ideas which transcend the limits of their own experience in a way that cannot be underestimated (King, 2009). Hand and Levinson (2012) also speculate that the controversial nature of particular issues can also generate discussion and engagement. While many discussions of this nature can take place in the context of social studies (Ho et al., 2017; Laughter et al., 2018), Pescatore (2007) argues that English and social studies teachers can work together to support students’ critical thinking and literacy skills. Moreover, discussions about contemporary events can arise as teachers and students make connections between literary texts and the present day (Bomford, 2019).

These dialogues need not be accidental. As noted in the introduction, there are opportunities afforded within the ACE and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE – equivalent to A levels in the UK) for teachers and students to discuss current issues in the media. For example, in year nine, students learn to engage with representations of issues in the media. Specifically, they learn to “interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issues, events, situations, individuals or groups are constructed to serve specific purposes in texts” (ACARA, 2024a, para 1.). At a senior level, in the course of VCE English, they learn to analyse the ways audiences are positioned by a persuasive text in relation to a “contemporary substantial local/and or national issue” (VCAA, 2022, p. 18). Along with this, the senior curriculum envisages that students will be given “explicit teaching of contextual information and cultural knowledge required to support an understanding of the selected issue and texts” (VCAA, 2022,

p. 18). Where there exists a broad body of research related to dialogic practices in English classrooms (covered later in this review), just how secondary English teachers in Australia use dialogue as a strategy to build the sorts of critical thinking about current issues in the media envisaged in both junior and senior curriculums remains an open question.

2.2.2 English teaching and democratic education

These curriculum connections aside, this project argues that there are deeper justifications for engaging students in dialogue about current issues in the media in English classrooms. In particular, the project aims to make a clear connection between the study of secondary English in Australia and the development of a democratic citizenship. As alluded to in the introduction, from a rhetorical point of view at least, there is a strong relationship between education and a free and thriving society in Australia. Official statements about schooling in Australia and English in particular foreground the importance of developing active informed citizens who make a contribution to public life (ACARA, 2021b; Education Council, 2019). A common approach to thinking about the relationship between education and democracy is to consider education *for* democracy and education *through* democracy (Biesta, 2007; Sant, 2019). Culp et al. (2023) argue that education *for* democracy holds that teaching and learning across subject areas contributes to the flourishing of society and students within those societies as active, capable participants. Riddle (2022b) similarly argues that education *for* democracy can help young people connect their lives and schooling in powerful ways. In this way of thinking, democracy is not just a system or political processes – it is a way of relating to others and being in the world (Culp, 2023; Dewey, 1916). The task of teaching for democracy then is intimately tied to public life and how people interact with each other about the issues that impact them all.

Arguably, the work of generating citizens of the future extends beyond one particular discipline. Recently, several scholars (Mirra et al., 2018; Spanke, 2021) have lamented that citizenship has been confined to a single subject in Australian schools (i.e., in AC - Civics and Citizenship) – as if questions of

how to engage in public life can or should be contained to a single class. In this spirit, there have been calls to make more explicit and prominent connections between citizenship and English teaching (Farrell et al., 2022; Spanke, 2021). Writing in the context of the COVID pandemic and increasing concerns about climate change, Farrell et al. (2022) argue that, “it seems clear that, in the context of global pandemic, social and environmental crises it is time to rethink the ways in which secondary English contributes to citizen formation, and the ways we understand, speak, read and write about ourselves in the world” (p. 317).

The challenge to rethink English teaching in the of democratic crises points to both the historical nature of the profession and the capacity for the profession to change and develop over time (Doecke et al., 2021). For this project there are benefits to looking back and drawing upon the intellectual resources of the past (Turvey et al., 2012) – aware that the English teaching as it is now is not the way it always has been (Diamond & Bulfin, 2021). Acknowledging this, the project draws from the history of English teaching to paint of picture of English as a space in which students can develop their voice as active and critical citizens about issues that matter to them. In doing so, I draw on traditions the centring of the lives of students and classroom talk in postwar years in the UK through to engagement with the politics of texts as advocated by proponents of critical literacy in Australia in the late twentieth century.

Indeed, one of the key messages of this project is that English teaching and citizenship are and ought to be interconnected. Over past four decades, global neoliberal reforms in education have shifted the focus of schooling to the attainment of academic results through managed, low-risk teaching of standardised curriculum (Sahlberg, 2016). The effect of these reforms has been to turn schools away from their civic purpose (Sahlberg, 2016). Despite these reforms, English cannot nor should it be divorced from questions of politics and citizenship (Doecke et al., 2006; Riddle, 2022a). From the early days of the subject in the UK (Newbolt, 1921), English was bound up with a “form of highly normativising civic education” which was fundamentally concerned with “the moulding of ‘good’ (that is, desirable)

citizens” (Belas & Hopkins, 2019, p. 321). This project reaffirms the connection between education democracy.

The research builds on a strong tradition of critical literacy in English classrooms in Australia that asserts schools ought not be places in which students merely absorb abstract bodies of knowledge about language and literature, but rather spaces in which they can collectively question and transform the world around them. Historically speaking, critical literacy has a longstanding place in education in Australia (Alford et al., 2022) . Alford et al. (2022)suggest that critical literacy came to fruition in Australia after a report by Kemmis, Cole and Suggett (Kemmis et al., 1983) who argued that schools should not just be training grounds separate from society, but rather as places in which students learn to collectively “engage society and social structures” (p. 18) – the substance of education being the development of “social and critically-reflective processes” (p. 18). This view of schools as spaces where students problematise the world around them connects with the views of Freire, who used literacy to help adults learners in Brazil to identify forms of oppression in their daily lives (Freire, 1972). This way of positioning literacy as a social practice acknowledges that the nature of school literacy itself is bound up with the perpetuation of privilege.

The contribution of critical literacy to a socially engaged orientation of schooling has been to draw attention to the ways that texts and language play a lively role in shaping our social and political lives. Morgan (1997) argues that “at the heart of an Australian critical literacy is a view of language and text as always operating within and on, for or against, the inequitable sociopolitical arrangements of society” (p. 23). In a way that resonates with the increasing prevalence of misinformation (Comber et al., 2018), a critical approach to literacy assumes that texts are “value-laden actions that attempt to do something to their readers” (Luke et al., 2011, p. 160). Textual choices are thus in some sense motivated and reflect a particular way of seeing the world. They are “positioned and positioning” (Janks, 2010, p. 61) – inasmuch as they draw on the writer’s ideas and values, with language choices designed to produce a

particular effect. The role of literacy is then to expose how texts work in the interests of the powerful and attempt to transform these power relations.

In practice, this project shares critical literacy's view of the importance of collectively analysing how students are positioned by texts and language in relation to the issues around them. Vasquez et al. (2019) argue that examining social issues and questions relevant to the daily lives of students is central to critical literacy. One of the key ways he argues that English teachers can help students develop a critical sense of the world is by "grappling with perspectives, representations, cultural knowledge and histories" in literary and "every day texts" (Riddle, 2022a, p. 23). Similarly, Luke (2018) states that "the practical aim" of critical literacy is "to generate vigorous classroom debates over what texts attempt to do, which ideologies are represented, and how students can use them in different social fields" (p. 175). This is manifest in Luke and Freebody's (1990) integrated model of reading which involves four dimensions: *text decoder*, *text user*, *text participant* and *text analyst*. This model has been widely used in schools in Australia for decades and continues to be taught as a model of literacy in teacher education in Australia (Tassone et al., 2022). This approach to reading canonical and everyday media texts in class inevitably gives rise to conversations about issues in society and how young people are positioned to adopt different views. It is cited here as but one example of the heritage of critical approaches which permeate English teaching in Australia and which is a key part of the professional context for my participants.

Reaching back beyond but connecting with critical literacy in Australia, the project also builds on a progressive tradition (Gibbons, 2013) of English teaching in England. Specifically, it builds on the work of scholars such as Barnes (1976) who argued for the importance of classroom discussion, and the view of students as active agents in the enactment and production of knowledge. Similarly, the project also builds on the idea – prominent in the post-war period – that English teachers can support students to develop their voice by foregrounding the experiences of learners. Given an increasing acceptance of

working class culture in the post-WW II years (Medway et al., 2014), many teachers began to centre the child, their culture, identity, experiences, interests and concerns in their teaching (Gibbons, 2013; Medway et al., 2014). At the heart of this democratic turn was an appreciation of the interplay between language and experience. In Dixon's view, language is central to experience, but language "belongs to the public world" (p. 6). As such, in ways that resonate with this thesis, he envisaged English classrooms as spaces in which "pupils meet to share experience of some importance, to talk about people and situations in the world as they know it" and in which each student "takes from the shared store of experience and builds it into a world of his own" (Dixon, 1969, pp. 6-7).

In many ways then, the project aligns with different models of English that have been conceptualised to make sense of subject English. Specifically, in foregrounding the value of opportunities to engage in democratic dialogue about current issues, it aligns with two of the models of English advanced by Cox (1989): namely adult skills and cultural analysis. That is to say that in learning to think critically about media texts and exchange views and respect differences of opinion, classroom conversations about current issues can prepare students for life as citizens who vote and contribute to democratic life of societies such as Australia (Doecke et al., 2006). As they do so, students are also growing as citizens. As a result, the teachers who promote dialogue are also "fostering expression" (Medway et al., 2014, p. 150), and thus encouraging what has been termed 'personal growth' through English (Dixon, 1969) – an aim shared by English teachers in Australia (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020).

In promoting dialogue, I argue that teachers are engaged in powerful albeit precariously-positioned intellectual and democratic work. Bomford (2019), Yandell (2017) and Turvey et. al. (2012) rightly insist on the power of localised knowledge and the power of deep personal learning that happens at the level of a lesson's 'sub-text,' which is often missing in official accounts of English teaching as a controlled, de-contextualised, activity determined by top-down directives. The epigraph for this chapter by Bomford (2019) makes this point powerfully. She argues that English "lessons that are 'for' the things that really

matter are organic, dynamic, protean and potentially vertiginously open-ended” (p. 13). All of these points serve to emphasise the abundant potential for the English classroom as a site for the development and construction of literate and civic identities – in this case, prompted by and enacted through discussions about language and power in the media, and through association with others in particular classroom contexts.

2.2.3 Challenges to English teaching for democracy

However, for all of the benefits, English teaching for democratic citizenship is not easy. Apple et al. (2022) argue that it involves “duty, resistance, creativity, imagination, collective action, and civic courage” (p. 247). The work of preparing young people for life as citizens is even more challenging today because of a range of headwinds confronting English teaching. One the major challenges for the profession today is the neoliberalisation of education. The neoliberalisation of the profession in Australia has led to a refashioning of educational values, curriculum and pedagogy as well as the role of teachers in secondary English classrooms (Angus, 2015; Ball, 2003; Connell, 2013). Connell (2013) dates this neoliberal ‘cascade’ from the 1980s. Neoliberalism regards education as the generation of human capital for the market (Connell, 2013) and it encourages students to see good education not in terms of personal growth or social impact but in terms of achievement in high stakes testing and readiness for employment in a competitive, individualistic academic system (Keddie, 2016). Under this way of thinking, teaching and learning have become regarded as commodities in a system of teacher accountability that reduces effectiveness to productivity (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011, 2013).

Practically, this has led to more monitoring and scrutiny of teaching. External forms of regulation such as the establishment of professional standards (AITSL, 2012) for school teachers and student performance on standardised testing regimes (e.g., NAPLAN and PISA) have been introduced in an attempt to regulate and measure teacher performance (Parr et al., 2023). As part of widespread standards-based reforms, teacher professionalism is assessed against national teaching standards

(AITSL, 2012) and national testing regimes such as the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In light of these developments, Loyden (2015) remarks that the work of English teachers in Australia has become “refereed by national curriculum and high stakes national testing” (p. 16). Teachers find themselves the subject of a “managerialist discourse” (Loyden, 2015, p. 17), and their work reduced to deliverers or transmitters of content akin to “IKEA assemblers” (Brown et al., 2021, p. 32) of decontextualised knowledge and skills (Brass, 2015).

In an age of increased teacher accountability, teacher quality is the subject of constant and intense media scrutiny due to the perception of a decline in standards and student achievement (Mockler, 2020; Shine, 2015). In relation to English, some have described the sense of a decline in literacy standards as a moral panic – arguing that literacy crises are less about education and more about politics (Gannon & Sawyer, 2015; Snyder, 2008). Concerns about perceptions of falling rates of student literacy have given rise to debates about pedagogy. Conservative voices have both lamented a putative failure to teach explicit grammar, phonics and the Western canon (Gannon & Sawyer, 2015), and derided critical literacy, which is regarded as postmodern indoctrination (Snyder, 2008). In practice, with its emphasis on relating to the here and now, such critiques might well bemoan attempts to make links between the study of literature and literacy and contemporary issues. This means that teachers who make these connections, may do so in the face of media commentary which calls into question the value of conversations which stray from instruction in ‘the basics.’

These changes also mean that teachers are having to negotiate challenges to their practice and identities. They are navigating a route between the standards and their own professional judgement (Doecke et al., 2024). Chisholm et al. (2019) argue that at a global level, English teachers are finding ways to satisfy both national and local administrators as well as the needs of their students including through giving students curriculum choices and adding new knowledge and ideas to official curriculum. More locally, Alford and Kettle (2017) concur with this position and argue that EAL teachers are

continuing to find ways to incorporate critical literacy into their teaching through “legitimizing students’ experiences and viewpoints” (pp. 205 – 206). In terms of identity, Mockler (2011) argues convincingly that what it means to be a teacher is shaped in part by a teacher’s own personal experiences, professional contexts and political environment. Despite changes to the professional context outlined above, how English teachers see their work remains intertwined with their own personal stories (Kosnik et al., 2016; Shin & Rubio, 2023). How democratically-minded teachers articulate a vision for their work drawing upon their beliefs, values and experiences in relation to professional expectations remains an open and relevant question in understanding why English teachers and their students might engage in classroom dialogue about current issues.

2.3 Facilitating dialogue in English classrooms

This project focuses on how English teachers promote dialogue about current issues in the media. In its focus on classroom dialogue and issues, the project draws on two traditions of research: dialogic teaching and discussions of controversial issues. The term ‘controversial’ is not intended to signify that the issues covered in this project are necessarily controversial, but rather to point in this review to the name of an established body of research which has relevance for this project. While both traditions vary in different ways, they both see the value in a dynamic exchange of ideas between people. Those promoting dialogic education associate dialogue with improved thinking, learning and oracy (Alexander, 2020). Added to academic gains are benefits associated with democratic citizenship (Alexander, 2020; Schuitema et al., 2018). In particular for this project, as noted in the introduction, Juzwik et al. (2013) extol the value of dialogue in English classrooms as a way to “prepare citizens to capably participate in community and societal dialogues about pressing issues of our time” (p. 8). Likewise, searching conversations about current issues provide opportunities to acquire political and world knowledge, as well as process events and challenging problems, foster curiosity and tolerance, generate multiple perspectives and unpack privilege and power in daily life (Fadel & Preston, 2017; Galczynski et al., 2011;

Hess, 2009b; Schuitema et al., 2018). They also foster so-called twenty-first century skills such as collaboration, respect and intellectual humility (Teo, 2019).

In what follows, I review the literature from both traditions in order to glean how best to promote and facilitate classroom dialogue about current issues in the media. I divide this section of the review into four parts. In the first part I review the teaching practices that are associated with facilitating rich and transformative exchanges with their students. This includes the features of classrooms dialogue (2.3.1) as well as how teachers plan and prepare their students for such discussions (2.3.2) and facilitate complex and critical thinking (2.3.3). Leaving the review at this general level, though, would not account for how teachers and students actually experience and enact dialogue in the classroom. Hence, I then turn (2.3.4) to critically examine these aspects in the second part in order to gain a more complete picture of the opportunities and challenges of enacting classroom dialogue.

2.3.1 *Characteristics of classroom dialogue*

Classrooms in which students and teachers engage in dialogue about current issues can be characterised in different ways. In the first place, they are political spaces (Hess & McAvoy, 2015) and as such naturally prone to disagreement. They are also characterised ideally by the collective and purposeful co-construction of knowledge. Alexander (2020) argues that dialogic classrooms are underpinned by six guiding principles: they are collective, supportive, reciprocal, cumulative, deliberative and purposeful. Classroom dialogue is typically framed by and linked to the curriculum and specific learning goals (Alexander, 2020; Juzwik et al., 2013). In an English teaching setting, dialogue can often happen around the study of texts as students make sense of new and complex texts together (Maine, 2015). In addition, dialogic classrooms foster a commitment to reason, knowledge and respect for each other (Resnick et al., 2018). More descriptively, Juzwik (2013) posits that classrooms promote a dialogic stance in English. This is manifest in statements such as: “I’ve heard you,” “I value what you’ve said,” “I want you to keep talking” and most importantly – “what I say responds to what you’ve said”

(Juzwick, 2013, p. 13). Nystrand (1997) envisages that such exchanges go both ways – with both teachers and students instigating and contributing to discussions as they grapple with problems and questions.

Such discussions also position students as citizens and thinkers. Schools are not only places where students learn what citizenship looks like, they are also spaces in which they enact citizenship themselves (Biesta, 2006; Riddle & Apple, 2019; Saetra, 2021). Alongside this, as Nystrand (1997) puts it, dialogic classrooms position students as thinkers rather than empty vessels who merely “report someone’s thinking” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 72). Given the nature of discussions about current issues (i.e., sharing views and opinions), students are in effect positioned as thinkers by default in these exchanges. However, this way of positioning young people as only holders of opinions may also hide other important aspects of a student’s identity at play in discussions about issues (Sabey, 2022). How teachers and students negotiate the intellectual and personal dimensions of classroom exchanges is unclear and a point of interest to this research project.

2.3.2 Preparing for classroom dialogue

Developing the sort of classroom culture in which dialogues about current issues in the media can thrive involves fostering a positive classroom environment. This is particularly important work given the high levels of perceived disruptive behaviour in Australian schools (OECD, 2023). First and foremost, the literature from dialogic teaching and controversial issues emphasises the importance of establishing a classroom culture conducive to dialogue. Students need to feel that they are part of a safe and supportive classroom in order to fully participate in classroom discussions (Saetra, 2021; Wansink et al., 2023). Creating a supportive classroom involves setting clear expectations. This includes normative behavioural expectations such as tolerance and respect (Saetra, 2021). It also includes setting clear expectations for communication – in the form of ground rules (Littleton & Mercer, 2013; Resnick et al., 2018; Saetra, 2021) or norms that can cover communication (i.e., general expectations around the

nature of interactions), deliberation (i.e., management of discussion, argument and deliberation) and epistemology (i.e., relationship to subject-specific content and ways of thinking) (Alexander, 2020).

In addition to cultivating a classroom environment through discursive expectations, others have drawn attention to the importance of strong interpersonal relationships. In the context of diverging views about contentious issues, students need to feel safe enough to disagree with one another (Saetra, 2021). Burbules (1993) goes further, likening dialogue to a sort of non-competitive game which is full of surprises. He argues that dialogue is governed by rules of participation (i.e., all feel that they can participate), reciprocity (i.e., concern and respect for each other) as well as commitment (i.e., willingness to share and stay with the exchange) to the other and the dialogue. He also rightly points out that classroom dialogue involves a significant degree of risk and uncertainty. As such, he suggests that entering into a dialogic relation is created and maintained through emotional bonds of concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope – bonds which take time to develop (Burbules, 1993).

However, while the idea of a safe and supportive classroom makes sense to many, others have raised important objections. Criticisms of a ‘safe classroom’ essentially come down to the potential negative impacts of curtailing speech for intellectual inquiry and social transformation. On the topic of race, Leandro and Porters (2010) note that regulating talk around race by insisting on safety only really benefits white people, and so they call for conversations that involve more risk. Similarly, from a social justice point of view, Arao and Clemens (2013) call for ‘brave spaces’ rather than ‘safe spaces.’ They argue that students can often conflate “safety with comfort” (p. 135), and so they problematise common normative tropes such as ‘agree to disagree’ and ‘don’t take things personally.’ Others, like Callan (2020), who are more concerned with the curbing of intellectual inquiry, distinguish between the intellectual activity and the identities. He (Callan, 2020) argues that conversations should protect the personal dignity of those involved while leaving topics and questions open for lively discussion. In

practice this means ensuring that students and teachers respect each other as equal participants, while at the same time allowing for a robust, considered exchange of opinion.

Beyond setting up the right environment, facilitating dialogue also involves thinking about the form of classroom dialogue that teachers want students to participate in. While much of the literature from controversial issues foregrounds discussion, the literature about dialogic education draws attention to other types of classroom talk. At the broadest level, Mercer and others (Littleton & Mercer, 2013; Mercer, 2000) distinguish between exploratory (e.g., critical but constructive), disputational (e.g., adversarial and competitive) and cumulative talk (e.g., presenting ideas alongside others without critical engagement). Others distinguish between dialogues that are teacher or student led – including teacher led dialogue (Resnick et al., 2018) – such as a whole class discussion. Alexander (2020) goes further and posits seven types of teaching talk: rote, recitation, exposition, discussion, deliberation, argumentation and dialogue. Still others have classified talk based on parsing them through two sets of binary dimensions: dialogic vs authoritative and interactive vs non-interactive (Mortimer & Scott, 2003) or inclusive vs critical and convergence vs divergence (Burbules, 1993). In the latter case, Burbules (1993) generates four genres of dialogue from his two set of distinctions: debate, inquiry, instruction and conversation.

While on the surface debate might appear antithetical to dialogue, Burbules (1993) appears less interested in the competitiveness of many debates and more in the valuable function that debate can serve in fleshing out alternative positions. This is an important consideration given the prominence of debate as a format in the media and politics through which democratic societies address current social and political issues. It is also important given the prominence of debating in schools manifest in organised inter-school competitions (e.g., Debating Association of Victoria 'schools' competitions). While it could be argued that it is naïve to see dialogic potential in school and classroom debates, this

criticism is reductive of teachers' and students' experiences of facilitating and participating in debates. After all, it is important not to confuse discursive form with dialogic quality (Lefstein, 2006).

At a more practical level, teachers also can think about what will spur dialogue in their classes and plan accordingly. Juzwik et al. (2013) regard any "activity, heuristic, assemblage, guide, or other mechanism" which helps "scaffold students into talking to learn" as "dialogic tools" (p. 35). They list a range of teacher and student led dialogic tools that can be used in English classrooms. These include activities that teachers can engage in before talk takes place such as organising the space, composing a prompt or writing a rubric which helps students grasp what participation should look like. Some of the teacher tools that engage students in interaction include presenting controversial statements and having students move to places in the room to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statement. Other student-led tools include modelling the language of discussion, through to having students generate questions. In addition to these two, there are activities such as a debate, fishbowl (i.e., two circles - an inside circle discusses an issue with the outside circle observes and provides feedback), gallery walk (i.e., moving as a class to discuss different pieces of work), literature circle and Socratic seminar (i.e., student-led group discussion of a text), as well as think pair share and role play activities.

In addition to these types of activities, teachers also need to pay attention to the practical dimensions of conducting classroom discussions. This includes giving attention to student grouping and composition, the organisation of the classroom space and considerations related to time spent talking in lessons (Alexander, 2020). The literature also points to the importance of the sorts of tasks and how they have an impact on the nature of classroom dialogue. Resnick et al. (2018) recommend setting tasks that challenge students and which require them to explain and elaborate on their thinking. Others draw attention to the need for teachers to build background knowledge (Saetra, 2021) in order to engage fully and make the most of classroom discussion – whether that be content knowledge or accumulated

working knowledge developed through group association (e.g., what was taught last lesson) (Barnes, 1976; Littleton & Mercer, 2013). They build background knowledge and create interest (Saetra, 2021). There is a paradox here though for dialogic researchers: while it might be the case that the sophistication of a dialogue depends on participants having a base of content knowledge, it would also seem to be a tenet of a dialogic approach to teaching that knowledge is co-constructed through the enacting of dialogue (Higham et al., 2014). This is particularly true of learning related to issues that are unfolding in real time. It remains to be seen how teachers view the relationship between discussions about current issues and background knowledge.

2.3.3 Modelling and fostering complex and critical thinking

The literature shows that during classroom dialogue, English teachers can model and develop critical thinking in a variety of ways. Above all, they can exemplify the discursive practices they want their students to emulate (Laughter et al., 2018; Saetra, 2021). In a climate of political polarisation, this includes modelling the practices teachers want students to emulate – including listening, clearly defining the topic and nature of the dialogue (Laughter et al., 2018). It also means making time for reflection on the exchanges that take place in classrooms (Laughter et al., 2018). Importantly, teachers can also moderate and regulate the discussion in accordance with the goal for the discussion – with more intervention where the focus is thinking with discussion and less teacher regulation where the focus is on students developing their own experiences of dialogue (Schuitema et al., 2018).

One of the main ways they can regulate classroom interactions for learning is through mobilising a range of discursive strategies or ‘moves.’ In summarising the main approaches to dialogic teaching that students and teachers draw upon, Cui and Teo (2021) posit five moves. In no particular order, these include *elicitation* (i.e., inviting contributions), *connection* (i.e., making connections between participants), *extension* (i.e., explaining and elaborating), *critique* (i.e., evaluating contributions) and *challenging* (i.e., clarifying contributions). These moves need not be isolated from teacher talk nor

deployed in a mechanical fashion. Rather, Nystrand (1997) argues that powerful learning occurs when teachers and student respond to each other in unscripted ways through authentic questions and uptake. Moreover, the same moves can be embedded within traditional forms of instructional talk. Notably, Alexander (2020) and others concur that the third turn in a typical pattern of teacher instructional talk (i.e., initiation – response – evaluation/feedback) provides an opportunity for teachers to develop and extend student thinking by having students rephrase, elaborate or explain what they have said.

In addition to these moves, there are moves that foster relationships and social justice. Of particular note is Burbules's (1993) argument that without overuse, "regulatory statements" (e.g., "I'm not sure you are listening") can help sustain the "spirit of the dialogic relation" (p. 93). In the same way, Resnick et al. (2018) argue that it is important for teachers to reinforce positive behaviour by highlighting when students are meeting shared norms for dialogue, a practice that would seem key to the purpose of the project – that is improving public dialogue. These more general moves to promote critical thinking can be complemented by other strategies to promote social justice in relation to social and political issues. Recent scholarship by critical scholars (Vetter et al., 2020) has identified particular moves that teachers can make to best facilitate engagement with texts and ideas that have a view to social justice. These include inquiring into power and privilege, inviting marginalised perspectives, disrupting dominant views and stereotypes, and identifying different courses of action.

2.3.4 Enacting classroom dialogue

Despite the benefits of dialogic teaching, enacting dialogue about current issues in the media is not straightforward. Relatively little is known about the experiences of teachers enacting dialogic pedagogies in their classrooms (Dunn, 2018). Among what is known, there is a recognition that teachers who attempt to implement a dialogic approach face a range of systemic challenges. For one, Alexander (2020) argues that dialogic teaching runs counter to the accepted orthodoxies of traditional schooling: allowing talk in class subverts the idea of a silent classroom, and a focus on speaking and listening

problematizes a traditional focus on reading and writing in English classrooms (Ollerhead, 2022). In addition, Higham et al. (2014) note that there are particular challenges with secondary settings, including the compartmentalisation of knowledge across subjects and the physical movement between classes and different teachers. In addition, at all levels, the narrowness and instrumentality of standardised tests also appear to be fundamentally opposed to the more open and authentic pursuit of knowledge associated with dialogic teaching (Segal et al. 2017). To manage the tensions between the two, Segal et al. (2017) advocate for an ironic stance toward test-preparation wherein students are taught how to complete the test while also problematizing the skills and ways of thinking it assumes.

At an individual level, enacting dialogue in classrooms involves working through a range of issues related to teacher professional identity and practice. Dunn (2018) finds that in the facing of perceived immovable curriculum mandates, personal beliefs and views of mentors, many teachers can find themselves negotiating competing discourses which impact the enactment of dialogic pedagogies. What they say about their practice can embody these contradictions (e.g., allowing students to talk freely while feeling the need to 'manage' such conversations). As such, they rightly suggest that teacher educators need to do more to prepare teachers to navigate these competing discourses and work pragmatically to implement them. On top of this, there are other tensions and dilemmas that individual teachers have to deal with in the course of an activity or lesson. Writing from the perspective of English teachers, Juzwik et al. (2013) wonder whether there are limits to how supportive a classroom can be in terms of whether teachers allow all students to say anything (i.e., what if a comment is incorrect, hateful or discriminatory?). Likewise, they see a tension between encouraging participation and channelling talk for academic purposes, between teaching with authority and being authoritarian (i.e., managing vs controlling the discussion) and between addressing and allowing surprising comments in the moment. Given these dilemmas, they (Juzwik et al., 2013) argue that there are no right answers to these dilemmas and that dialogic teacher knowledge develops over time.

Beyond the individual, other scholarship highlights the contextual challenges that English teachers face with group dynamics and the nature of particular issues and topics. For example, they need to be mindful as to how gender and academic achievement mediate experiences of classroom dialogue. Howe and Abedin (2013) argue that gender and achievement play a role in terms of how dialogue is experienced in classrooms. They suggest that boys play more “focal roles” (p. 337) in classroom dialogue than girls, and they tend to receive more feedback (positive and negative). On top of this, they argue that high-achievers are more likely to participate in class and receive positive feedback. Arguably, this participation is not just down to students – it is also enabled by teachers. As such, Snell and Lefstein (2018) make the case that the way teachers think about their students in terms of cognitive ability can impact how different students are involved in classroom dialogue (e.g., hard questions for ‘bright’ students). The flipside of this is that when students come to be inadvertently positioned as weak they may take that up and “continue to fulfil the identity of low achiever attributed to them” (p. 73). Hence, while dialogic classrooms set out to promote a collective spirit of inquiry, students of perceived ‘low-ability’ can find themselves on the margins of challenging discussions.

Students also experience classroom conversations differently depending on the topic or issue discussed and its intersection with their own identities. Where the topic impacts them, Indigenous students and students of colour can use silence as a form of protection (San Pedro, 2015), or alternatively they might centre race and racial interpretations of texts (Sosa, 2020). Moreover, Fadel and Preston (2017) find that a student’s interest in talking about current global events is associated with cultural diversity. From their interviews with teachers, they note that ‘mainstream students’ with less global experience can be insensitive and offensive toward others from refugee or culturally diverse backgrounds – who can seem more interested and engaged with discussions about global events. As a result, they call for improved intercultural communication in schools and “culturally responsive classrooms” (p. 12).

Related to the nature of particular issues, scholarship also suggests that even seemingly trivial discussions about current issues and news can provoke polarising and controversial responses and present teachers with a range of associated dilemmas. Cassar et al. (2021) argue that controversial issues can arise spontaneously in classrooms as students openly talk about socio-political issues or as teachers push back against troubling student comments. Moreover, information presented as uncontroversial in one context can leave the opposite impression in a different social or political context (Cassar et al., 2021; Pollak et al., 2018). For example, issues in relation to gender or marriage may be received differently in different contexts; discussion of same sex marriage may be more charged in a religious school setting than a more secular one.

In addressing such controversial issues, teachers respond in a variety of ways. Hess (2004) suggests they typically avoid the topic or issue. In doing so, they might relegate their decision-making to school authorities and curriculum expectations (Weeden & Bright, 2020). Alternatively, they might privilege a particular view, aim for a 'balance' or deny that there is an issue at all (Hess, 2004). Moreover, while it is generally accepted that classroom discussions have a particular purpose or objective (Alexander, 2020), teachers can also sidestep and scholasticize issues by focusing on literacy skills and thus downplay potential controversy related to the issue itself (Pollak et al., 2018). Teachers also face difficult decisions when it comes to disclosing their own views. In an era in which culture wars are increasingly played out in schools (Journell, 2022), teachers understandably fear backlash from students, parents, administrators and the wider community for sharing their own views (Geller, 2020; Journell, 2022). Facing accusations of indoctrination by media pundits, teachers may opt for what Journell (2022) terms 'committed impartiality,' whereby they share their own views while validating others. However, the danger in this or attempts at neutrality is that in the process teachers can leave their students vulnerable to misinformation and hate speech (Geller, 2020). Running through all of this is of course the acknowledgement that discussions about controversial and polarising issues inevitably involve

emotions. Accordingly, teachers can choose to recognise, accommodate, reject or foreground the ways that they and their students feel (Garrett, 2020).

These factors as well as the challenges enumerated previously point to the reality that students have unique experiences of classroom dialogue. This is arguably a result of the unique approaches of different teachers as well as school and community cultures. It is the case that while teachers might share a broad understanding of what implementing a dialogic approach entails, they may well emphasise different aspects and roles which are related to their discipline (van de Pol et al., 2017). Equally important is the role of personal beliefs and experience, which can influence a teacher's decision to engage in discussions about different issues (Cassar et al., 2023). This connects with literature that highlights the importance of personal identity and history to what it means to be a teacher (Mockler, 2011; Shin & Rubio, 2023). To that end, there remains significant work to be done to develop a full picture of the relationship between a teacher's own history, values and beliefs and the way they enact classroom dialogue. This picture would no doubt also take into account the important role of school culture in shaping and enabling different teaching practices.

Ascertaining the influence of the personal and contextual over the professional is important given the implications for democratic education. If teachers do in fact model different approaches to engaging dialogue about current issues in the media, then what teaching *for* dialogue and democracy looks like is not generalizable to a particular ideal or standard of practice but rather, or at least in part, a reflection of the particularity of teacher identities and the contexts in which teachers work. Taken together, it would seem important to view the facilitation of dialogue in English classrooms not only in terms of the mechanics of managing classroom interactions, but also a purposeful embodied enactment of identities, values and agency in specific contexts. Given this and the central role that teachers play, it is vital to glean how teachers view and make sense of their own dialogic practices.

2.4 Conclusion

This review has examined the literature in relation to the dialogic teaching of current issues in English teaching contexts. It defined current issues as prominent and contemporary problems in society around which there are multiple viewpoints. It found that the junior and senior secondary curricula in Victoria, Australia, provide opportunities for teachers to engage their students in dialogue about the issues they see playing out around them – albeit in the context of learning about media representation and argument analysis. These curriculum openings make sense when the study of English is connected to the development of democratic citizenship. Statements by professional organisations in Australia (e.g., ALEA and AATE) bear this connection out, as well as post-war traditions of English teaching and research in the UK which foreground the world of the student and the vital importance of oral language in the English classroom.

That being the case, the review also highlighted some distinct gaps which align with the research questions outlined in the introduction. In particular, while engaging students in dialogue about current issues in the media might be important and worthwhile, there is very little documented research that describes how secondary English teachers in Australia might promote such dialogue. In the first place, it is unclear how teachers who do so conceptualise their work as English teachers – especially in the face of mounting pressures to teach to the test and standardise their practice. Moreover, practically speaking, it is unclear how teachers generate and manage dialogue and the social, political and emotional challenges associated with them. Finally, given the uniqueness of each classroom experience, it remains to be seen how a teacher's own identity, values and history shape the nature of the dialogue in each context. These are profoundly important questions in making sense of how secondary English teachers, in an educational context increasingly intolerant to risk and 'going off script' (Sahlberg, 2016), take up the opportunity to promote dialogue about the social and political problems that arise in the media today.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 252)

3.1 Introduction

From a topical and methodological point of view, engaging in dialogue with others is central to this project. As outlined in the introductory chapter, my goal in this study is to understand how secondary English teachers promote classroom dialogue about current issues in the media. This line of inquiry arises from my desire to address what appears to be a deterioration in public discourse about many current social and political issues in democratic societies (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021). In this context, English teachers can play a powerful role in promoting dialogue about current issues through their pedagogical example. Underpinning the rationale for the study's research design is an appreciation of the power of different voices coming together in a shared space – a point that resonates with the quote from Bakhtin in the epigraph above. Far from being a comforting truism, seeing value in classroom dialogue is connected to a particular vision of the relationship between literacy, education and citizenship that will be explored in greater detail below.

In this methodology chapter, I provide an account of the theoretical understandings that underpin the project, and I then proceed to break down what this means in terms of study design. In the first section (3.2), I provide an outline of my theoretical orientation for both the methodology and the topic of classroom dialogue. In doing so, I locate the project overall within a constructivist paradigm, and I argue that the facilitation of classroom dialogue about current issues can be thought of as the opening of a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2007, 2011; Wegerif & Major, 2019) through which teachers can foster dialogic ways of thinking and relating to each other (Lefstein & Snell, 2013). In such space, teachers and students are best able to examine different views about current issues, about the worlds in which they live, and about the “socially charged li[ves]” of the languages they speak (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). As a result, they

fulfil one of the aims of English teaching in Australia, which is to “pose, explore and respond flexibly to local, national and global issues, problems and challenges” (ALEA, 2023, p. 1). Flowing from this (3.3), I outline the rationale for, and features of, a case study research design (Yin, 2009). As part of this latter section, I also explain the practical and ethical considerations of conducting this project. I begin with the theoretical framework.

3.2 Theoretical framework

In this first part of the chapter, I make explicit both the paradigmatic and substantive theoretical assumptions (Punch, 2014) that I bring to the project. In other words, I lay bare the assumptions that inform my methodology and shape my view of classroom dialogue about current issues in the media. In putting forward these assumptions, I take it that my choice of theory is guided by the “work” (Biesta et al., 2011, p. 227) I want that theory to do. This research is primarily interpretative in nature. As a social researcher, I use theory to both ground the interpretative nature of my work and help me make sense of the complexity of teachers’ lived experiences, beliefs and values in relation to how they promote dialogue about current issues with their students.

Accordingly, in what follows, I aim to do two things. First (3.2.1), I make a case for adopting a broad constructivist view of knowledge and reality in this study. This orientation resonates with the types of questions addressed in the project, and it acknowledges the constructed and contextual nature of social realities. After doing this, I outline (3.2.2) my conceptualisation of classroom dialogue as it relates to this study. In honing in on classroom dialogue, I seek to address to the need identified in the introduction for English teachers to model and facilitate ways of talking (in and out of classrooms) with others in considered and empathic ways about current issues to counter the animosity and coarsening of public discourse evident today. To that end, I draw on the work of Wegerif (Wegerif, 2007, 2011, 2024) and Lefstein and Snell (2013) to represent and interpret the reported practices of my participants as the

facilitation of a multidimensional dialogic space in which students can learn to think and relate to others dialogically about current issues.

3.2.1 *Researching within a constructivist paradigm*

From a theoretical perspective, this study is built on what Creswell terms a “constructivist worldview” (2014, p. 8). It stands in contrast to positivist research (Punch, 2014) that argues that reality inheres in observable events and facts which can be pinned down and measured. In contrast, a constructivist ontology posits that reality is a social construction and that there are no single, objective accounts of reality but rather “multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 9). The choice of this paradigm is driven by the need to represent the messiness of human experience and how people make meaning of their experience – resisting positivist research attempts to ‘capture’ the world “in simple, law-like terms” (Moses, 2019, p. 9). In short, constructivism centres the individual and their experience of the world, and this project aims to do exactly that by exploring the beliefs, identities and classroom experiences of secondary English teachers promoting dialogue about current issues playing out in the media.

There are also sound educational reasons why I have adopted an interpretivist epistemology for this study. To inquire into the classroom practices of teachers in relation to their students is to recognise the social nature of education. Biesta et al. (2011) argue that situating educational inquiry in a constructivist paradigm makes sense given that many people regard education as a “socially constructed and (re)produced – reality” (p. 229). In this way, Biesta et al. (2011) argue that to study education as a specific “social phenomenon” (p. 229) entails understanding the inter-related interpretations and meanings of the people involved in schooling. This position resonates with this project. For example, the project is premised on an understanding that dialogue about public issues can be seen as an important civic activity in democratic societies (Lepoutre, 2021) , and so facilitating such discursive activities represents the (re)production of a particular socially valued activity by teachers and students within

Australian classrooms in the twenty-first century. From a theoretical viewpoint, I am trying to better understand how teachers promote this discursive activity in their classrooms, and this requires me to foreground the personal views and experiences of secondary English teachers, not just advocate for a set of decontextualised pedagogical strategies and approaches.

As a researcher, working with a constructivist paradigm has implications for how I position myself and make sense of the data. On the one hand, I acknowledge that the ways participants make sense of their experience are shaped by context and the interactions they experience in particular settings. The conversational nature of my data generating methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews and focus groups) means that the nature and quality of the context and interaction powerfully shape the data generated for my study (Mishler, 1991). Here I recognise that it is not just my participants who are constructing their experience in their interview interactions with me. Rather, as a researcher engaged in qualitative research, I acknowledge my central participatory role in shaping so many aspects of the research endeavour, such as how my central research question is addressed. In other words, to appropriate the language of much mainstream research, I recognise that I am the “primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Lichtman, 2017, p. 43). Implied in this position, and the reflexive analytical standpoint I wish to enact, is the view that I am not merely an interpreting bystander who needs to control their biases. Rather, I take that I am a co-storyteller with my participants (Mishler, 1991). In many ways, this speaks to a relational view of research in which, as Clandinin (2016) argues, researchers study “people in relation studying people in relation” (p. 23) – meaning being constructed.

Following from these few introductory philosophical reflections, I want to stress that a constructivist paradigm has specific implications for the research design and positionality I adopt in this study. For this project, as I have stated, I adopted case study research design. The concept of ‘case’ foregrounds the importance of context in this study, which in turn acknowledges the subjective nature of human experience and knowledge. This is not to merely say that views and experiences of participants should

be sought after as mere interesting curiosities. Rather, it is to acknowledge that multiplicity is a central feature of social reality and that the activity of understanding human experience requires a researcher to actively “look for [a] complexity of views” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). The implication of this is that this project aims to develop rich descriptions of practice rather than build an overarching, universal theory independent of context. In addition, throughout the thesis, I promote the voices of my participants through using at times extended quotes, and I take care to provide interactional context for their voices as they speak from within different contexts. I also try to identify and attend to the dilemmas my participants face. Instead of trying to solve them, I attempt to think *with* rather than *about* my participants (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020).

3.2.2 Conceptualising classroom dialogue

As a project committed to promoting dialogue, this study builds on a longstanding and important tradition of scholarship which highlights the value of dialogue in education (Alexander, 2020; Barnes, 1976; Nystrand, 1997). Salient empirical findings from previous studies of dialogue in education have already been cited in the literature review. A lot of research in dialogic teaching is focused on evaluating the efficacy of particular models (Lefstein & Snell, 2013). However, my purpose differs from this approach and so does my methodology. As I indicate in the introduction, in this study I adopted a more exploratory, bottom-up approach in search of answers to the research question of how secondary English teachers are promoting dialogue about current issues. In analysing the participants’ experiences of promoting dialogue in their English classrooms, the study aims to make sense of the “dialogic possibilities” (Lefstein & Snell, 2013, p. 13) evoked and encouraged by the different pedagogical practices that have helped shaped these conversations. In doing so, from a theoretical point of view, I interpret the work of secondary English teachers in facilitating meaningful talk about current issues as the opening of a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2007, 2011, 2024) in which various dialogic ways of thinking, relating to others and acting civically are encouraged (Lefstein & Snell, 2013)

This project grew out of a desire to address a deterioration in public discourse (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021) as outlined in the opening chapter. I have said that this deterioration is manifest in an unwillingness to engage with the views of others about current social and political issues in a considered, empathetic manner. To counter this in schools, I argue that English teachers can play a powerful role in helping their students learn to make and hold space for others whose views diverge from their own. As Boyd and Sherry (2024) argue, “in this time of division and difference there is an urgent need to create opportunities for respectfully discussing multiple ways of seeing and knowing in dialogic space” (p. 115). It is for this civic reason that I draw on the notion of a ‘dialogic space’ (Wegerif, 2007, 2011, 2024) – a space, which Maine (2015) argues is a space of possibility because new and multiple ways of seeing the world are open to those in the space. In this light, in the current context, the dialogic space represent a powerful holding place for people to encounter diverging views and critically reflect on their own perspectives. In doing so, I underscore not only the practical pedagogical strategy but also the political significance of the dialogic space (Lambirth, 2015).

I borrow and adapt the metaphor of a dialogic space for this research project and use it as a conceptual framing device to better understand what English teachers are doing when they facilitate meaningful classroom talk about current issues. While the metaphor of a space for dialogue is not unique to Wegerif (see Anagnostopoulos et al., 2008; Buber, 1937; Wegerif & Major, 2019), he has certainly popularised the term in educational literature (Kim & Wilkinson, 2019). Drawing on Wegerif’s work, this study takes the view that a dialogic space involves the promotion of a meaningful interaction between different voices. This builds on the broadest take on the dialogic space as a “shared space” in which “different perspectives can interact and new learning occur” (Wegerif & Major, 2019, p. 113). Indeed, Wegerif (2011) argues that a dialogic space is “a dynamic continuous emergence of meaning” (p. 180) that arises from different views being held in tension (Wegerif, 2007). The utility of adopting a spatial metaphor for this study is that it provides a way of thinking about dialogic interactions as spaces

that can be opened, widened and deepened (Wegerif, 2013). In this way, the metaphor is well suited to the practical considerations of planning, structuring and facilitating learning – aspects which are all reported in the data for this study.

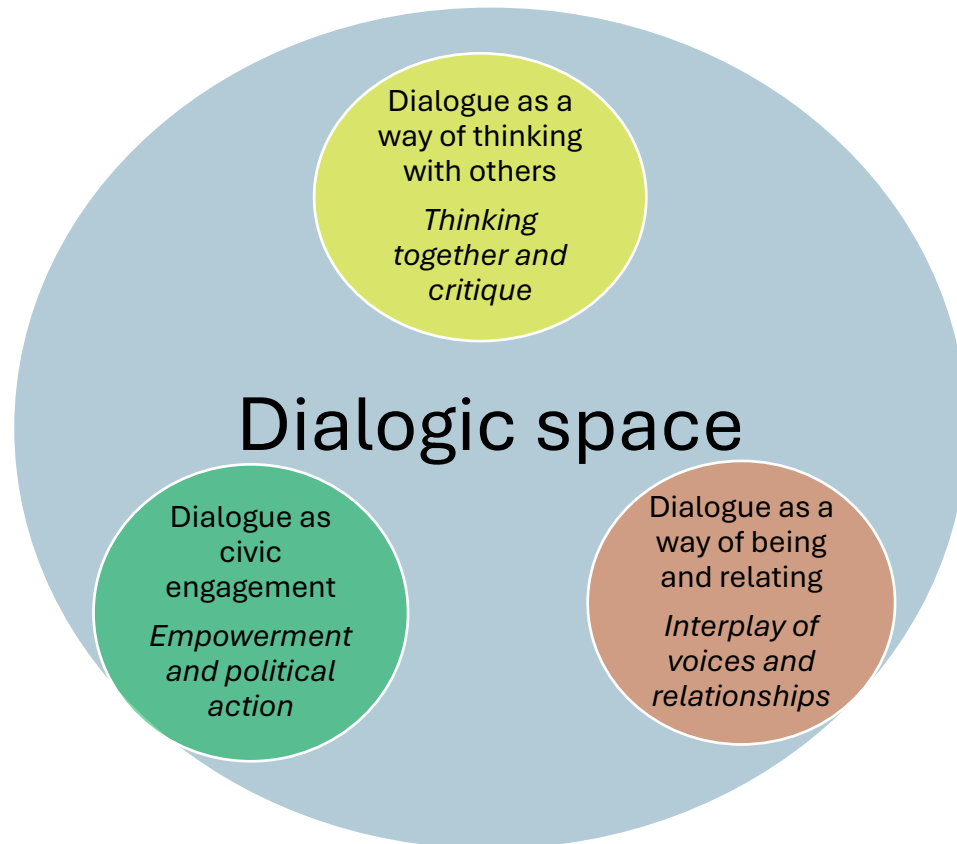
As noted earlier, I understand the dialogic space to be a metaphoric space in which dialogic ways of thinking and relating to others are encouraged. This is to say that I take the view that the function and purpose of the interaction between different perspectives within a dialogic space varies. Lefstein and Snell (2020) appreciate that while models of dialogic instruction are useful to inform practice (Alexander, 2020; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Michaels et al., 2008; Nystrand, 1997), when taken as gospel they run the risk of setting up unrealistic ideals against which teachers can unhelpfully judge themselves (Lefstein & Snell, 2013). In this respect, I am encouraged by, and situate my work within, Lefstein and Snell's (2014) bottom-up view of classroom talk which sees "dialogic possibilities" (p. 13) in all classroom interactions. Given that my data consists of reports of practice, I extend the concept of "dialogic possibilities" in interactions to include the possibilities evoked or encouraged by particular practices as well. This is to view particular strategies and techniques as having dialogic potential. In thinking about these potentialities, Lefstein and Snell (2014) argue that there are six different dimensions of dialogue that might be invoked or facilitated in any interaction. These call these: dialogue as a pure "interactional form"; an "interplay of voices"; "critique"; "thinking together"; "relationship" and "empowerment" (p. 15).

As illustrated in Figure 1.1., I draw on this summary and adopt it as a multidimensional framework for analysing the ways in which teachers' reported practices could be interpreted as facilitating dialogic ways of thinking and relating to others. In order to show how these dimensions might address the deterioration in public discourse, I group the six dimensions into three strands as follows: (i) dialogue as a way of being and relating; (ii) dialogue as a way of thinking with others; and (iii) dialogue as civic engagement. Moreover, while I separate these strands for practical purposes, I acknowledge that there is inevitably some overlap and blurring between them. In practice, it is often hard to separate them out and teachers

can be aiming at different dimensions in a single moment or event (Lefstein & Snell, 2013). In addition, I also align with Lefstein and Snell's (2013) view that teachers' facilitation of classroom dialogue can happen through aspects beyond talk itself (i.e., classroom activities, assessments, or use of physical space) – what Juzwik et al. (2013) would call 'dialogic tools'. I aim to account for these different aspects in my analysis and the ways that teachers develop the different dimensions throughout.

Figure 1.1

A visual representation of a multidimensional dialogic space that teachers can promote in classrooms.



While it is impossible for educators to consider all of these dimensions when they generate dialogue about current issues in the media, I am interested in the ways that the work of teachers in my study resonates with different conceptions of dialogue. That is to say, while the analytical framework was

originally used to analyse classroom discourse, I use it to understand the dialogic possibilities that are evoked by the practices of teachers who participated in this study. For this research project, encouraging these different strands is important because each strand responds to the deterioration of public discourse outlined in the introduction. As discussed, the coarsening in public speech touches not only on questions of communication but also how people think about problems and about each other. In other words, a solution requires more than people getting their facts right – it is also involves fostering an openness to others, a willingness to entertain different voices and an awareness that cultural and political loyalties and identities are at play when people talk about issues in the media. In what follows, I break down the three different strands of dialogue and consider their implications for this project

(i) Dialogue as a way of being and relating. Dialogue as a way of relating and being encompasses the ontological and relational conceptions of dialogue. This strand groups together Lefstein and Snell's (2013) categories of dialogue as an "interplay of voices" and as dialogue as "relationship" (p. 15). In both cases, what is valued is the promotion of multiple but inter-related voices as well a sense of care for and inclusion of others. While there are many possible thinkers whose work touches on these dimensions of dialogue, I follow Lefstein and Snell (2013) in drawing explicitly on the ideas of Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin. While there are differences between the two theorists, there are also some striking convergences (Friedman, 2001) between them that will be borne out in the discussion below.

This project recognises the deeply relational dimension of dialogue epitomised in the thinking of Martin Buber. From Buber's perspective, there are two fundamental sorts of relationships that people have with the world around them which are encapsulated in the pairs of words: I-Thou or I-It. Friedman (Buber, 2002b, introduction by Friedman) explains that in contrast to I-It relations, which objectify and separate the self from the Other (Guilherme & Morgan, 2017), an I-You relationship is one of "openness, directness, mutuality and presence" (Buber, 2002b, introduction by Friedman, p. xii). The I-You relationship is dialogic to the extent that it involves a radical and non-instrumental openness to the

Other, because as Buber (2013) puts it, “You has no borders. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing...[rather] he stands in relation” (Buber, 2013, p. 37). While Guillerme and Morgan (2017) suggest that this relation can exist between teachers and students, Buber (2013) disputes this. Rather, he holds that the while the teacher feels obliged to “awaken the I-You relationship in the pupil” (p. 111), the pedagogical nature of their relationship means that complete mutuality can only be partially realised. However, in arguing this way, Buber seems to reduce teachers and students to their educational roles. This reduction in the potentiality of these relations obscures the multiple identities at play in the classroom and specifically the ways in which discussions about current social and political issues position teachers and students as equal members of a common political community.

The multiple identities at play in encounters between teachers and students points to the idea that dialogue about current issues involves more than just language and communication. While dialogic relations might be enacted in a particular exchange, for Buber, dialogue is about a richer form of encountering. As Gordon (2011) explains, “by the I-You relation or dialogue Buber did not mean the ordinary conversations that we have with colleagues, friends, or family on a daily basis. For him, the term dialogue is used in a much narrower sense to signify the act of one whole being encountering or confronting another whole being” (p. 209). Buber (2002a) uses the word ‘communion’ to encapsulate what he means by this sense of encountering in dialogue – noting that “communion...is an embodiment of the word of dialogue” (p. 6). Crucially, in echoing the importance of a dialogic space, the aim of such encounters for Buber is not to resolve differences or empathise with others, but to create a meaningful space in-between people (Gordon, 2011). For classrooms then, this means fostering a genuinely inclusive environment in which students can meet each other as equals and listen deeply to each other.

Yet dialogue is not only a way of relating to others; it is also a way of being in the world. Bakhtin, who was deeply inspired by Buber (Friedman, 2002), provides a more ontological account of dialogue. From the standpoint of language, Bakhtin (1999) suggests that the utterances people make are part of an

infinite chain of communication that extends back in time. As Holquist (2002) explains, for Bakhtin “an utterance is always an answer. It is always an answer to another utterance that precedes it, and is therefore always conditioned by, and in turn qualifies, the prior utterance” (p. 58). With a connection to an infinite number of utterances in different times and places, language is “social throughout” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 259). Or as Holquist (2002) pithily puts it, language is “drenched in social factors” (p. 59). The implications for this thinking about language in a dialogic space is that the words that people utter are never only their own. As Bakhtin himself notes, what we say to each other is “populated...with the intentions of others” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294).

These observations about the dialogic nature of language point to a broader and deeper observation that Bakhtin makes about the dialogic nature of reality and consciousness. In drawing upon the unique polyphonic quality of Dostoyevsky’s writing in novels, he argues that:

dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life— in general, everything that has meaning and significance (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 40).

This is buttressed by his famous that I have invoked for the epigraph of this chapter, “a single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 252). For Bakhtin then, plurality is not a product of life or interaction. Plurality underpins life itself, in the sense that “all meaning is...dialogic” (Renfrew, 2015, p. 79). Bakhtinian scholars argue that this understanding of the world rules out the possibility of a unitary, stable consciousness (Shields, 2007). Both Buber and Bakhtin suggest that the self is forged in relation to the Other (Friedman, 2002). One of the implications for this in dialogic classroom teaching is that the teacher may wish to identify and demystify the appearance of the unchallenged monologic voice in conversations and discourses in the world and in the classroom. This identifying and demystifying will often mean highlighting that the

“normal condition of existence” is not this monologic voice but “the presence of two or more voices” in dynamic interaction (Shields, 2007, p. 61).

There are a range of implications for fostering a dialogic space that reflects a dialogic way of relating to others and being the world. Building from Lefstein and Snell (2013) and White (2016), I argue that from a relational point of view, dialogic spaces that foster dialogic relationships are built on trust and a sense of community, wherein students and teachers feel comfortable raising topics or opinions about current issues with each other in a spirit of mutual understanding or open searching. Moreover, as a way of being, dialogue encourages a plurality of voices – in a classroom this signals the importance of fostering and validating diversity of opinion and interpretations. The quality of such dialogic spaces may well be judged in terms of the struggle that students have with ideas rather than any particular sense of closure or resolution. This is not to say that dialogue cannot lead to such a conclusion. Rather, it is to suggest that seeking an answer to a question may, and probably should, prompt more questions. In this light, conclusions are provisional and open to revision.

(ii) Dialogue as a way of thinking with others. The second strand of dialogue I wish to discuss here is a way of thinking with others, and that this dialogic thinking with others can be a tool in the development and refinement of knowledge. Lefstein and Snell (2013) connect the two approaches of ‘critique’ and ‘thinking together’, and they make specific references to Socrates and Vygotsky in making this connection. To take this approach, the conversations about current issues in the media in the dialogic space of a secondary English classroom can be seen by teachers as an opportunity to model, observe and develop critical thinking and communication skills. In these interactions, students and teachers can present, contest, rebut and clarify claims that others (including their peers) make. In what follows, I very briefly sketch the view of dialogue from a Socratic perspective before turning to a more extensive discussion of Vygotsky and sociocultural theory more broadly and its relationship to this thesis.

A Socratic approach to educational dialogue sees classroom talk as a way of engaging in collective scrutiny of ideas. A Socratic approach draws on the features of the dialogues of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates as recorded by his student, Plato. These features include notions such as: forming propositions as leading questions; using examples and counter examples; a sequential testing and cross-examination of claims; a willingness to answer questions; a belief in logic and an interest in truth rather than a mere desire to win a debate (Dillon, 2016; Wilberding, 2019). In many ways, these elements are characteristic of a rational and informed citizen. In short, as Lefstein and Snell (2013) put it, a Socratic approach to dialogue can look like the “to and fro of question and answer, which helps to clarify positions and test claims, through the challenge of argument and counterargument” (p. 17). Many of these elements are adapted to suit various educational domains (Wilberding, 2019). The Socratic circle has come to be associated with a particular manifestation of dialogue in English classrooms. It involves a student-led critical discussion of a text with students arranged in co-centric circles – the inner circle talking about the text and the outer circle providing feedback on the quality of the discussion in the inside circle (Copeland, 2005).

From a sociocultural perspective, the structure and quality of interactions like those in a Socratic circle really matter. Built largely on the work of Vygostky (1987), sociocultural perspectives are relevant to this study because of the central principle that higher mental functions develop through the internalisation of semiotic resources developed in interaction with others (Lantolf et al., 2018). Of particular importance is the recognition that language is both a cultural and a psychological tool (Mercer, 2000) – language can be seen as a symbolic cultural tool that can become internalised to help us organise and make sense of the world (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). This implies there is a dynamic relationship between interaction and thought, communication and knowledge, with a secondary English student’s “understanding of the world develop[ing] through interaction with others” (Mercer &

Littleton, 2007b, p. 12). This way of thinking has important implications for understanding and interpreting dialogue within this study.

From a sociocultural perspective on education, classroom language is inseparable from what is taught and learnt. Barnes' pioneering work (1976) on classroom talk highlights the importance of talk to education. Barnes shows that curriculum should not be understood as abstract or isolated texts, implemented in classrooms, but rather interactions that are fundamentally bound up with communication. Indeed, Barnes (1976) and Alexander (2020) both make this insightful point that it is not easy to distinguish content from communication. This acknowledgement endows all classroom conversation with potential significance. The work of Vygotsky (1987) and others such as Barnes (1976) has inspired scholars' thinking about educational dialogue and the nature and quality of classroom discourse. As noted in my literature review, researchers working from a sociocultural position typically value students and teachers listening to each other and critically building on each other's contributions in particular contexts (Alexander, 2020; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Nystrand, 1997) as well as insisting that classroom talk be factual or rational (Michaels et al., 2008; Resnick et al., 2018).

In short, dialogue as a way of thinking emphasises the social nature of teaching and learning and the powerful educational role that teachers play as cultural agents in fostering particular ways of thinking and engaging with others. This strand draws attention to the ways in which modelling, scaffolding and particular types of interactions that teachers facilitate can lead to the internationalisation of patterns of critical thinking and communication with others – patterns of thought reflecting patterns of interaction.

(iii) Dialogue as civic engagement. Dialogue can also be conceptualised in political terms. In drawing on theorists who advocate for this political view of dialogue, Leftstein and Snell (2013) foreground the work of Paulo Freire (1972), and his commonly referenced *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. They suggest that a Freirean view of dialogue can be captured in the word 'empowerment.' I add Arendt (2018) to Freire and argue that dialogue can also be seen as a tool for social and political engagement. In other words,

this view of dialogue involves seeing dialogic spaces as political spaces in which students and teachers actively construct and critique the world around them as citizens. This is not to suggest that the other strands of dialogue do not have implications for civic life, but rather that this strand foregrounds political questions in ways the others may not.

Freire envisages dialogue as more than just a polite exchange of ideas – dialogue is a tool for human emancipation and liberation of the oppressed. For Freire (1972), what it means to be human is to engage in dialogic praxis. He argues that human beings do not live mechanical lives; rather they engage in praxis – “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1972, p. 33). He leaves little room for doubt on this question, observing that “human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis, it is transformation of the world” (p. 126). This is the critical impetus to Freire’s work. He connects dialogic praxis with freedom – remarking that “liberation is praxis: the action and reflection of men and upon their world in order to transform it” (1972, p. 79). This is because reflecting and transforming the world involves naming of oppression and raising of critical consciousness about social justice. This critical consciousness or ‘conscientization’ through dialogue has been aptly described by Rule (2011) as a “political process that strips away oppressive myths and uncovers the truth”. It is “a collective process that [can] happen[] in culture circles, classrooms, community projects, a process that is both political and educational” (p. 934). This consciousness raising about matters of social justice adds a degree of complexity to the nature of dialogue within English classrooms.

However, as Freire himself argued, the critical awareness through dialogue that he reported on and advocated for, was always in tension with an ever-present challenge to dialogue. Freire (1972) coined the term, the ‘banking model’ of education for a top-down approach in which teachers supposedly fill students with knowledge that is “detached from reality” (p. 71). From a Freirean and critical perspective, the banking model is acutely limiting: the teacher is positioned as the knowledgeable authority who does the thinking and talking, while the student listens and is “thought about” (p. 73). In contrast to this,

Freire (1972) promoted the concept of “education as the practice of freedom”, a freedom that blurs distinctions between who teaches and who learns. It is also grounded in a view of knowledge as generated by a collective through an “impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [that] human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72). It is inquiry that holds human relationships as central to education. In many ways, this PhD project is underpinned by a Freirean concern to make dialogic teaching and learning in English classrooms as relevant as possible. That is to say, the active discussion of current issues in English classrooms represents an attempt to link learning about language, text and media to the everyday lives of students not only to the benefit of students learning about English but also their capacity to become “active and informed citizens” (Education Council, 2019). There are clear connections between this view of dialogue and the field of critical literacy discussed in the literature review.

Both Freire and Arendt (2018) consider dialogue to be a uniquely human and democratic activity. Arendt (2018) goes further, arguing that dialogue can be construed as a form of political action (Kateb, 2000), and it signifies the capacity for action as opposed to merely labour and work. For Arendt (2018), Dialogue distinguishes humans from animals. As the epigraph by Arendt at the start of the introduction to this study illustrates, in exchanging such ideas and opinions, students and teachers are engaging in political action. Here, ‘political’ refers not to the machinations of governments and institutions, but to individuals speaking and acting together. In doing so, they are not merely offering up a view, but engaging in an act of creation, in the sense that every time people speak and act together, they are participating in the regeneration of human life (Arendt, 2018). For Arendt, this kind of action is akin to natality. As people act, they “insert [themselves] into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth” (Arendt, 2018, p. 176) in the sense that “what is special about action is that it inserts something original and unanticipated into the world” (Fry, 2014, p. 46). In this way of thinking,

participation in classroom dialogue about current issues in the media provides a way for students to give form to unique civic identities.

This view of educational dialogue as a political action rests on a view of the publicness of classrooms. Curiously, Arendt argues that schools are “pre-political” (Arendt, 1958, p. 10) – by which she means spaces of transition from the private to the public world. In this way of thinking, classrooms can represent the world but are not the world itself. In Arendt’s thinking, the job of a responsible teacher is to act as an adult representative of the world and introduce their students to it, “pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world” (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). Higgins (2010) has persuasively argued that teaching occurs in a grey zone between the worlds of work and politics, inasmuch as it “involves a special form of making that is never complete” (p. 411). This begs the question as to whose perspectives matter – for many students, school is a place where they not only prepare for civic life but also enact democracy (Biesta, 2007). To that end, this study considers classrooms as a form of public space, in the sense that they bring teachers and students together to act and speak in socially meaningful ways not merely in their roles as teachers and students but as citizens of a common political community.

Treating classrooms as public spaces furnishes an ontologically rich conception of what is at stake in classroom dialogue about current issues. Arendt (2018) regards the public realm as the domain of the “world of things” (p. 52) around which humans can relate to each other. She also sees the public realm as a transformational space of appearances, wherein “something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves—constitutes reality” (Arendt, 2018, p. 50). Dialogue can reveal something about those who participate in it, and it is through speech that they “appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua men [sic]” (p. 176). Loidolt (2017) has added to this line of thinking, arguing that the very notion of personal identity is dependent on an “in-between” (p. 263) that arises at the juncture of different perspectives. In both cases, the public realm is a significant space of becoming and

relating to others. Translating this to schools means viewing classrooms as places where students' teachers are constructing the world around them and their place in it.

There are clear implications for the conceptualisation of dialogue in terms of civic engagement from drawing on the works of Freire and Arendt together. The first point that needs to be made in this regard is to reiterate the political nature of classroom spaces. This connects with a long history of scholarship from liberal and critical traditions which sees English classrooms as sites of ideological struggle (Pennycook, 1994) or spaces of civic development and becoming (Hess, 2009b; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Schuitema et al., 2018). Following from this, dialogue serves as a means to raise students' critical consciousness about power and oppression, and enact political identities. In other words, participating in dialogue about current social and political issues allows students to identify problems and injustices, and confront and contest particular worldviews. At the same time, dialogue serves as a tool to enact particular civic identities and for students to understand themselves with respect to the world and to proactively insert themselves into the world. Admittedly, this work is messy and complex. Discussing conflicts, pandemics, global crises and government policies can arouse all sorts personal beliefs, values and biases. As teachers work through these challenges, insights from Freire and Arendt complicate the view that teachers and students relate to each only in their institutional roles as teachers and students. For Arendt, effective teachers are always adults who represent and introduce the world to their students, while for Freire any hierarchal distinction between the two parties is problematic.

3.2.3 Drawing it all together

This study is interested in the ways in which secondary English teachers can promote dialogue about current issues in the media. While students also play multifarious roles in these dialogic spaces, the focus of this study is on what teachers do to open a dialogic space in which different types of dialogue and thereby different dialogic ways of thinking and relating to others can be facilitated and encouraged. However short or long and however planned or spontaneous, through the way they structure and

facilitate classroom discussions about contemporary issues that arise in the course of teaching secondary English teaching, teachers can foster dialogic ways of thinking with others, relating to others and engaging in civic society. Taken together, for the purposes of this research, these strands offer up a view of dialogue as a critical and civic-minded engagement with different voices in a spirit of openness and respect. Encouraging these three strands promotes a responsible way of engaging with others who hold diverging views. While all of this applies across any subject, my focus is on subject English and the ways the teachers mobilise practices with dialogic possibilities address the multifaceted breakdown in public discourse outlined at the start of this section and in the introduction.

3.3 Research Design

In the previous section, I outlined my theoretical framework, which pays attention to both the theoretical assumptions underpinning the interpretative work of the project and those particular to the topic itself. I argued that the project proceeds from a constructivist view of knowledge that values the multiple perspectives of individuals and their experiences of social reality. I then outlined my theoretical framework for understanding how teachers might promote a dialogic space and facilitate dialogue – conceptualising dialogue in terms of three strands: (i) dialogue as a way of being and relating; (ii) dialogue as a way of thinking with others; (ii) dialogic as civic engagement. Combined, these three strands encourage an informed and constructive way of engaging with others which counter the deterioration in public discourse today and the breakdown in critical thinking, communication and relationships associated with this.

Having set out this framework, in this next section, I outline the research design and describe the practical details of data generation and analysis. Grounded in qualitative and constructivist research paradigm, I make (3.3.1) the case for the project's adoption of a case study design with multiple participants. I then (3.3.2) describe my choice of semi-structured interviews and focus group as primary data generation techniques. Alongside this, I detail my analytic choice of a Reflexive Thematic Analysis

(Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2019b) and what this involves in terms of analytical process and ethos as well as the presentation of data in the final thesis report. Finally (3.3.3), I provide details about my participants and the recruitment process.

3.3.1 Case study design

In line with an appreciation of the highly contextual and situated nature of human experience, I adopted a qualitative case study research design for this study. In the first place, the thesis is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research focuses on how people construct and make sense of their lives and the world around them (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argue that the four main characteristics of qualitative research include a focus on meaning and understanding, an inductive process, an acknowledgment of the role of the researcher in the research process, as well as a “richly descriptive” (p. 15) product. These characteristics are central to this project. My aim is to understand how the participating English teachers in the project are able to promote dialogue about current issues in the media. This topic has an inductive quality that lends itself to thick and nuanced descriptions of classroom practices and the meanings teachers give to these practices.

More than just being broadly qualitative in nature, the study draws attention to the contextual nature of teacher work. This position informs the study’s adoption of case study research design. As acknowledged in the literature, case study research design is a useful way of making sense of the “complexity of social phenomena” (Yin, 2009, p. 4) and the “multiple, multivalent realities operating in a situation” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 377). For this project, that situational sense-making centred around the challenges and opportunities involved in promoting dialogue about current issues in the media in the context of teaching secondary English in Australia. Put another way, this case study has an overarching subject and an object (Thomas & Myers, 2015). The object or topical focus of study is the experiences of participating teachers promoting dialogue about current issues in the media in different secondary English and EAL classrooms. The subject for my study is the group of teachers in my study,

who share a common subject area, teaching level (i.e., secondary) and location: Melbourne, Australia. These commonalities lend themselves to treating the group of teachers as a “bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 37). This is not to ignore the differences between teachers and their contexts but rather to acknowledge that there are strong commonalities between them in terms of the system, location and subject area. This is why I refer my study design as a case study with multiple participants.

Following from this, and as noted in the Introduction, the study is positioned to be both descriptive and exploratory (Thomas & Myers, 2015; Yin, 2009). By comparing and contrasting practices across a range of participants, the study aims to generate a richer and more nuanced set of ‘findings’ (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2009) about these teachers’ experiences in order to respond to the research questions. Consistent with being a qualitative case study with multiple participants, data from different participants are presented together in each findings chapter. Moreover, as a result of the adoption of case study research design, the study’s findings are not presented in a way as to make sweeping claims about all English teachers in Australia. Rather, the findings relate to the participants within the case study while at the same time gesturing outward to broader professional and research communities.

3.3.2 Data generation and analysis

The ways I generated and analysed the data (see Table 1.1) were shaped by my decision to employ a case study research design with multiple participants. My original plans were to conduct an analysis of classroom discourse between teachers and their students. However, at the time I was making decisions about my methodology, schools in Victoria were just returning to full-time on-site teaching after a long series of COVID lockdowns. In light of this, there was a restriction in relation to onsite research in government schools. It was also apparent that many of the conversations I wanted to capture were not always predictable for scheduling purposes (e.g., impromptu dialogue about issues students raise at any moment). Hence, I adapted my methodology to focus on teacher reports of practice. Focusing on

teacher experiences, beliefs and values has helped me see how teachers make better sense of what they report doing in the classroom.

In terms of data generation, this occurred through interviews with six teachers of English and a single focus group consisting of three teachers who had participated in the interviews. Interviews and focus groups are some of the most common methods of data generation in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014); the analysis of interview transcripts (see Appendix 8) is also a common way to understand a situation, person or event (Cohen et al., 2018). In my study, the opportunity to generate and analyse transcripts of interviews aligned with my aim of seeking to better understand the experiences of secondary English teachers who promote dialogue in their classrooms about current issues playing out the media. The choice of these two main sources of data centre the teacher in the study, allowing them to share and make sense of experiences that occurred within their own context. While interviews and focus groups may differ in terms of the researcher's control over the flow of conversation, they both share the common thread of dialogue, which resonates theoretically with the topic of the thesis.

In the case of the focus group, participants were able to put ideas and questions to each other and in a way that allowed them generate new insights into the practice of English teaching today. This focus group functioned as an extended dialogue with participants in order to follow up on lingering questions that emerged from what I noticed in the interviews. Importantly, the focus group also was an opportunity to encourage interactions between participants (Jude, 2020) and thus allow for the generation of data that reflected collective experiences – what Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011) call “sedimented collective memories and desires” (p. 15). This allowed me respond to the research questions with a view to teachers in the case and English teachers as a social group.

In formulating guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews, it is important to note that my study originally focused on discussions of news in English classrooms. At the same time, I wanted to situate their practice in relation to the teacher's history, their school context and personal engagement

with news themselves, in the hope that this would enable me to get a fuller and richer understand of each teacher and their dialogic practices in context. With these considerations in mind, the questions touched on in my interviews (see Appendix 5) ranged from teacher perception of their own professional identity and the teaching and learning culture of their schools, through to their own engagement with news media, their views on the role of discussion in teaching and learning, as well as a narrower focus on their views and experiences related to teaching and managing discussions about news in the classroom. In contrast, the topics for the focus group were designed as a follow up to the interviews to further explore common themes from the interviews in a shared setting. The question prompts (see Appendix 6) I put to the focus group included: their professional learnings from experiences of discussions of news in classrooms, observations of identity work in classroom dialogue about news, as well as reflections on the suitability of the curriculum.

In relation to logistics, two of the interviews were recorded in person, three over the phone and one online via Zoom. After the interviews, I organised one focus group linking participants and myself as the researcher via video conferencing software. Like the interviews, only audio only was recorded. Participants who could not attend the focus group were able to submit individual answers in a word document. Out of three who would not attend, one participant took up the opportunity to respond in writing (see Appendix 10). Importantly, in both the interviews and focus group, I adopted a semi-structured approach (Drever, 1995) – using my bank of questions as a guide and prompt. In keeping with this format, at the start, I encouraged participants to treat the interaction as a conversation, and to take the discussion in any direction they wished. In doing so, I aimed to cast the interviews as relational, dialogic events (Mishler, 1991). The benefits of this approach were that it allowed space for teachers to share their thoughts and about issues and topics in response to my questioning and take the conversation in a direction they wanted to take it. In turn, this helped me to generate a fuller, more

nuanced picture of the participants' decision-making and practices, and allowed me to make better sense of the personal and professional classroom experiences they shared.

As noted in the foreword to the thesis, while my early focus was on experiences of critical discussions about news, participants raised other topics such as news media literacy, different forms of media, through to the challenges associated with facilitating productive talk about social and political issues playing out in the media – a topic that was particularly prominent in the focus group. Hence, my use of the term 'current issues in the media' is an attempt to capture the wide-ranging nature of the discussion with participants in interviews and the focus group. Likewise, as I note in the foreword to the thesis, while classroom discussions of news was originally my focus, in analysing the data, through reports of practice, it became clear that teachers in my study appeared to be doing much more than just talking about issues in the news with their students. Rather, there was something much more dialogic about their practices that needed to be captured.

Turning to analysis, my overarching purpose was to get a sense of how teachers promote dialogue. As a result, I adopted a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2019b) in order to help me to build a cohesive narrative with common threads and themes across the data sets to best answer the research questions. Building on Braun and Clarke's (2006) earliest approach to thematic analysis of qualitative data, the same authors developed their thinking in response to what they see as misapplications of their original paper (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). In their more recent publication, they argue for a reflexive approach to thematic analysis. Broadly speaking, in using the term 'reflexive', they push back against a version of thematic analysis which attempts to disguise or remove both the identity of the researcher and the messy work of analysis. Instead, they argue the researcher plays a role as "a *storyteller*, actively engaged in interpreting data" (Braun & Clarke, 2019b, p. 848). The product of a thematic analysis is hence not an objective account but a set of "creative and interpretive *stories* about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic

resources and skill, and the data themselves” (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, p. 594). This way of conceptualising my role as researcher and storyteller resonates with an ethos I adopt in wanting to think *with* rather than *about* participants.

In term of how the analysis is carried out, I broadly adopted Braun and Clarke’s (2019a) process approach. This involved working through a series of recursive and non-linear phases with the aim a developing careful and compelling account of the data. From a practical point of view, I started by familiarising myself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, annotating and taking notes for ideas and initial codes (see Appendix 6). I then developed a more fine-grained knowledge of the transcripts through systematic coding. In doing so, I adopted a coding approach that gave me flexibility to describe what I was seeing and hearing and hence give more voice to the participants. With this in mind, I chose a combination of descriptive (i.e., topic) and NVivo (i.e., key words or phrases verbatim) codes (Saldaña, 2013). In doing so, I used NVivo software to store and code transcripts. As I read and coded transcriptions in NVivo, I would read a section of text and ask myself questions such as: What is this bit of text about? What words or phrases are recurring or emphasised?

Table 1.1

This table summarises the data generation and analysis practices for this study

Data generation practices	Data generated	Data analysis tools
Interviews with participants	Transcripts of interviews	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
Focus group with participants	Transcripts of focus groups	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
Written responses to focus group questions	Typed responses	Reflexive Thematic Analysis

After completing the first cycle of coding, I manually listed my codes on a whiteboard and then thematically organised them according to patterns (Saldaña, 2013) I saw between codes. This process involved reflection (see Appendix 7). I then worked back and forth between the data and the codes to

construct themes that captured what I was seeing in the data. In doing so, I recognised with Braun and Clarke (2019) that themes do not “*passively* emerge...they are not ‘in the data’” but are “*actively* created by the researcher” (p. 594). Finally, I refined and named nine themes. I organised the codes under themes in NVivo, and drew up a table which included a description of each theme.

Table 1.2

Themes and their descriptions

Theme name	Description
‘Empowering young people’	All of the teachers had in some way a vision of student empowerment for their practice as English teachers. This theme describes how teachers view their work, and how they bring their backgrounds, values and roles to bear on their professional identities.
‘We’re doing them an injustice’	The majority of participants reflected critically on the extent to which the English teaching is preparing students for today’s media world. This describes the beliefs of teachers about news, news media literacy, communication and the curriculum.
Navigating the minefield	All teachers remarked on the challenges they face in relation to classroom dialogue about sensitive issues. This theme describes many of the challenges teachers confront and navigate.
Give them a mask	Many teachers in the study spoke about the challenge of managing discussions about challenging topics and issues. They shared different strategies to help students explore different views and identities.
Playing the demigod	All teachers spoke about how they generate classroom dialogue about issues in the media. This theme describes the different roles and strategies that teachers use to generate dialogue and critical thinking.
Working from the bottom up and across	Teachers viewed dialogue about current issues as neither perfect nor isolated. This theme captures the interconnectedness of such discussions with other areas of study and skills in secondary English, as well as the development of authentic and genuine practices across time and context.
‘It’s fragile, but we’ve got it’	Teachers spoke at length about the importance of getting the environment right in order to really unlock powerful conversations. This theme describes the ways

	that teachers build and maintain relationships, norms and expectations with students that enable dialogue.
The power of discussion	Teachers were adamant about the importance of dialogue in their classrooms – especially discussion. This theme describes teachers’ views about the role and value of such exchanges for them and their students.
Brining in news	All participants identified different ways that news and other media was incorporated into their classroom. There was a wide variation in responses, and this theme captures this range of practices.

3.3.3 Research participants and recruitment

For this project, I sought to recruit teachers from secondary classrooms (i.e., Years 7 - 12) who were currently teaching (or had recently taught) English or EAL students in Victoria. Having previously taught EAL myself at a secondary level, the choice of this demographic was partly driven by a professional interest in the teaching of English and an interest in the enactment of the English curriculum at this level. As noted in the introduction, one of the rationales for the teaching of English in the ACE is to enable students “to analyse, understand, communicate and build relationships with others and with the world around them” (ACARA, 2021b para. 1). These outcomes are also reflected in the rationale of Victorian EAL Curriculum, which aims to empower “students with the skills to become lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and active and informed citizens” (VCAA, 2021a para. 1). The EAL Curriculum notes too that the “study of various texts supports the development of communicative skills, linguistic knowledge and cultural understandings” (VCAA, 2021a para. 2). Overall, these points have helped me see the rich potential in understanding how classroom dialogue about current issues in the media can lead to improvements in students’ critical thinking, as well as their growth as citizens.

Having identified secondary English and EAL teachers as the group that would help me answer the research questions, I was able to recruit participants through professional organisations and personal contacts in line with relevant ethics approval for the project. Given that my six participants were

drawn from a mixture of former colleagues (two participants) and others who were interested in and able to participate in the project, the sampling approach for the study could be described as one of convenience (Cohen et al., 2018). Congruent with this and the case based research design, the project makes no attempt to generalize findings (Cohen et al., 2018) across all English teachers in Australia.

In terms of the practicalities of recruitment beyond personal contacts, I advertised (see Appendix 4) the study in the newsletter of two subject-based professional associations: the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) and Victorian Association for **Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (VicTESOL)**. All of respondents were emailed an Explanatory Statement (see Appendix 2) and a Consent Form (see Appendix 3), and they all returned consent forms electronically or in person before participating in either the interview or focus group. Following this, for most participants who were not interviewed in person, I arranged to conduct interviews via telephone, Zoom video communications, or in person if they wished. As noted previously, most participants chose to conduct their interview over the telephone, one chose Zoom and two others were conducted in person. The focus group was conducted online via Zoom. In line with the ethics approval, only audio was recorded using a portable recording device. Except for one participant, interviews were recorded.

All of my participants chose to be interviewed. However, only three participated in the focus group, and one person provided written responses to the focus group questions. While a written response is not the same as a focus group, for the purposes of analysis, the responses in both formats were treated similarly. This is because the participant who provided a written response was responding to the same guiding questions that were put to other participants in the focus group. Moreover, like focus groups, written responses have a dialogic quality in that they involve an exchange of questions and answers. Indeed, not only was the participant responding to a set of questions, but those questions emerged from dialogue with the same person and others. Table 1.3 provides relevant participant information about my participants.

Table 1.3*Participant details*

Name	Description	School	Participation
Dimble	Young male Cultural self-identification as 'white' Secondary English and English Language teacher, Literacy specialist University tutor Speaks about education at public events Voted as one of the best teachers in the world	Inner-city high (ICH) is a government high school in the inner suburbs of Melbourne	Interview Focus group
Polly	Middle aged female English background Migrant to Australia Secondary English, literacy teacher English area leader Background in theatre	Outer Suburbs High (OSH) is a culturally diverse low SES government school in the outer suburbs of Melbourne	Interview Focus group
Francesca	Young female Cultural self-identification as European background Secondary English and English literature teacher Background in writing, editing and book sales	Christian College (BC) is an affluent 'progressive' co- education independent school in Melbourne	Interview Focus group
David	Male No particular cultural self-identification Secondary EAL teacher and EAL area leader Background in multicultural media	Saints College (SC) is an an affluent, co- education independent	Interview Written responses

		school in Melbourne	
Wallace	Middle aged male Secondary English, English language and EAL teacher	Wells Grammar (WG) is an affluent and academically high achieving all-boys independent school in Melbourne	Interview
Sanja	Middle aged female Migrant to Australia Secondary English and EAL teacher Background in interpreting	Outer Suburbs High (OSH) is a culturally diverse low SES government school in the outer suburbs of Melbourne	Interview

As can be seen in table 1.3, six people originally expressed interest in participating in the study. The participants representing different cases came from a range of different backgrounds and teaching in various contexts. There were three women and three men in my study. Most of them identified as having no specific cultural background that needed to be considered for the interview, although two participants, Sanja and Polly, were born overseas. In addition to these factors, three of them worked in the public sector (Dimble, Sanja and Polly) and three in the independent sector (Francesca, David and Wallace) and each had varying levels of professional experience. Some held or had held domain leadership roles in their respective schools. At the time of the data generation, David was an EAL area leader and Polly was Head of English at her school. In addition, while most of the teachers had taught in

different English subjects, at the time David and Sanja were mainly teaching EAL. Finally, three teachers (Francesca, David and Polly) came to teaching from different professions.

3.3.4 Ethical considerations

At the conclusion of the study, there were no outstanding ethical issues identified with the project. The handling of consent and data management were conducted in line with university policies and procedures and ethics approval for this project (see Appendices 2 and 3). All participants were given the option of being identified in the thesis and subsequent research presentations and publications using a pseudonym. Moreover, in line with the study's desire to amplify the voices of my participants, the analysis of the data was conducted in a way (see 3.3.2) to ensure that interpretations are robust and the voices of participants are visible throughout the thesis.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described my theoretical and methodological approach to answer the research question of how English teachers promote classroom dialogue about current issues in the media. I have argued that the promotion of such conversations can be potentially conceived of as the attempt to open a dialogic space in which different dimensions of dialogue can be facilitated. I have grouped these dimensions under three strands: (i) dialogue as being and relating; (ii) dialogue as thinking with others; (iii) dialogue as civic engagement. Taken together, these three stress the importance of dialogue as a way of speaking about contemporary topics and debates in a careful, empathetic and critical manner.

Beyond setting out the study's theoretical assumptions about classroom dialogue, I have also I outlined the research design for this study in order to respond to the research questions. The design I chose was a case study with multiple participants, drawing on data from interviews and a focus group, which data was then analysed thematically adopting a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2019b) approach. Having outlined this, I now turn to a description of these themes and the associated findings.

PART B

Introduction to the Findings

In Part A, I laid the foundation for this study – I presented my rationale for the project as well as its theoretical and methodological orientation. In an increasingly polarised world in which people find it difficult to discuss social and political issues across differences, I have argued that there is a need to understand how English teachers can promote productive ways of engaging in dialogue with others about current issues playing out in the media. With this in mind, this project seeks to understand how English teachers open dialogic spaces (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2008; Wegerif, 2011; Wegerif & Major, 2019) about contemporary issues in which diverse views can be respectfully shared. In doing so, I draw upon a multidimensional approach to facilitating dialogue (Lefstein & Snell, 2013) in which dialogue can signify a way of relating and being, thinking with others and civic engagement, and where it is important to consider the whole gamut of tools and strategies teachers use – not just what they or their students say in class. To understand how teachers do this work in diverse contexts, I adopt a case study research design (Yin, 2009) with multiple participants, and use data from interviews and focus groups analysed through the lens of a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2019b).

In this part of the thesis, I describe the findings from the data and the analysis. However, before doing so, it is important to set the social and political context in which the study took place. Doing so will lead to a richer understanding of the data. While my participants did not talk at length about the specifics of their interactions in relation to different issues, they did refer to issues playing out in the media that were discussed by students in class. The data for this project was generated through one-on-one interviews and a focus group with teachers between May and August 2022. As noted, at the start of the year, Victoria was emerging from COVID – 19 lockdowns, the last of which occurred toward the end of 2021.

The year 2022 saw many significant events both in Australia and internationally that influenced the political and cultural mood in which teachers worked. In May, Australia witnessed a change of federal

government from the Liberal-National Coalition party (right-leaning) led by Scott Morrison to the Labor party led by Anthony Albanese. In 2021, Morrison had faced criticism over his handling of allegations of sexual assault in parliament (Noble & Meacham, 2022) for which he received a notoriously frosty reception from the previous winner of the Australian of the Year award: Grace Tame (Doran, 2022). Abroad, the world witnessed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent displacement of millions of Ukrainians. In the United States, the Supreme Court overturned Roe vs Wade, while in the UK, Rishi Sunak became the new British Prime Minister. Queen Elizabeth II passed away in September.

The most prominent issue identified by participants, including David and Sanja, was the war in Ukraine. While Russia had previously annexed Crimea in March, 2014 (Walker & Traynor, 2014), the main assault on Ukraine started with the firing of Russian missiles on the 24th February, 2022 (BBC News, 2024; Zinets & Vasovic, 2022) – roughly three months prior to the interviews with teachers. Not only was the war the subject of discussion – so too was the response by other countries. In particular, one participant indicated that some of his international students wanted to examine China's reaction to the conflict. In the early stages of the conflict, China's response was described by one Australian journalist as "frustrated and surprised" (Bagshaw, 2022, para 1) over its ally's decision to invade Ukraine without warning, while official rhetoric from China erred between defending Ukrainian territorial sovereignty and opposing sanctions against Russia. In light of the incursion, there was also media speculation at the time that the protracted nature of the conflict would have implications also for a potential armed conflict with Taiwan (Birtles, 2022), bringing the implications of the war closer to the Asia-Pacific region.

Besides the war in Ukraine, issues related to racial injustice were also reported by teachers as a topic of classroom dialogue. While occurring a few years earlier during COVID lockdowns, Francesca recalled a discussion about the significance of black squares on social media in early June 2020, as a way for people to highlight their solidarity with protests and concerns about racial injustice (Sinanan, 2020) in the wake of the murder George Floyd by a police officer in May 2020 in the United States. In addition to

events surrounding the Black Lives Matter protests, Dimble noted students coming to a position in favour of changing the date of Australia Day (Carlson, 2023). The date, which commemorates the arrival of Captain Arthur Philip's First Fleet into Port Jackson, New South Wales, is considered a day of mourning for many Indigenous Australians and has come to be associated not only with the historical violence committed against them, but also the ongoing physical, emotional and institutional violence they continue to experience as a result of colonialism and its ongoing effects (Carlson, 2023).

In addition to issues related to racial injustice, Dimble recalled a discussion of debates in the media about gender identity. In particular, one issue related to the action of then Government Services Minister Bill Shorten to put an end to a trial by the national health insurance scheme, Medicare, to use gender-neutral terms such as 'birth-giver' instead of 'mother' on some of its forms (Visentin, 2022). It has to be acknowledged that this debate occurred in a much broader context of 'culture wars' at the time (Douthat, 2022) that still persist today. This is evident in particularly heated debates in Australia about the place of transgender women in sport in April, 2022 (Chrysanthos & Rabe, 2022) – just before the start of the interviews for this study. In Australia, gender continues to play a part in the strong current of public discussion about domestic violence, sexual harassment a gender gap. Indeed, Francesca recalled that the question of parity of pay in sport had been a topic of classroom discussion.

In all, 2022 saw some major changes in political life in Australia – notably in the change of government and change of sovereign monarch. Despite these changes, many of the issues that emerged this year related to persistent issues of racism, global conflict and gender identity and gender politics – albeit contextualised in distinct places (e.g., Ukraine) and institutional settings (e.g., Medicare). Having sketched the issues that teachers and students were facing in 2022, I now turn to an analysis of the data generated through interviews and the focus group held during the same year.

Chapter 4 – Understanding English teachers who promote dialogue about current issues in the media

4.1 Introduction

Promoting dialogue about current issues in the media is not easy or straightforward. It arguably takes a particular type of teacher who sees value in making time and space for such exchanges. Put another way, there is something about ‘who they are’ as a teacher – their identity – that drives them to do so. It is clear that professional identity influences practice. As Mockler (2011) puts it, a “teacher’s work...is framed by and constituted through their understanding and positioning of themselves as a product of their professional identity” (p. 517). In this way, a teacher’s work is at least in part a reflection of how they see themselves and their beliefs, values about what teaching should be for and how it should be practiced. Understanding more about how the participating teachers see themselves and the work of an English teacher would seem to be crucial to understanding why they promote dialogue.

And yet teacher identities are not static or given. They are dynamic and multifaceted (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Gee, 2000). Importantly, teachers work out their professional identities in dynamic relation to the world around them. Drawing on research by Gee (2000) and Norton (2016), Parr (2024) argues that teacher identities are “(re)created, (re)imagined and (re)developed in association with contextual changes” (p. 32). This identity work is not without significance. Rather, teacher identity is central to making sense of “curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment” (Mockler, 2011, p. 517). Likewise, Buchanan (2015) argues that “teacher agency can be understood...as identities in motion” (p. 714). Brown et al. (2021) concur, remarking that teacher “agency emerges through, and is shaped by, an interplay of...components of identity construction” (p. 29). How English teachers conceptualise their work not only has implications for the practice now, it also has implications for teaching in the long term – “shoring up the sustainability of the profession now and into the future” (p. 31).

Mockler (2011) highlights three dimensions or domains that inform how teachers come to conceptualise their work. These are the professional context, personal experience and external political environment. For Mockler (2011), the personal domain includes anything “outside of the professional realm” (p. 520) - including race, gender, previous school experiences, hobbies and interests. The professional context relates to elements of their life as educators – including the influence of classroom experiences, particular school systems, and professional learning. In contrast to these, the external political environment involves the “discourses, attitudes and understandings surrounding education that exist external to the profession, experienced by teachers largely through the media” (p. 521). In all, teacher professional identities emerge through a dynamic negotiation between what the teacher brings to their job, the context of their employment and developments in the political landscape which have implications for the way they perform their work.

Evidently, the political landscape around teachers is shifting and pulling teachers in different directions. Only three years ago a major UN report called for a new ‘social contract’ to address the global concerns about the future of the planet. The report proposed a “a new social contract for education – one that aims to rebuild our relationships with each other, with the planet, and with technology” (UNESCO, 2021, p. v). The call for a new social contract echoes the specific focus of this project in addressing a deterioration in the quality of public discourse (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021). As outlined in the introduction, young people in Australia today find themselves growing up in a world with deep and dangerous divisions and fraying social cohesion (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019; Edelman, 2023; Zheng & Bhatt, 2022). Online, they can easily find themselves ‘bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ which can limit access to the opportunity for genuine engagement with diverging views (Ranalli & Malcom, 2023; Thi Nguyen, 2020). All of this occurs in a context of international tensions, ongoing culture wars around issues such as race and gender, as well as a persistent sense that young

people are missing out on opportunities that were afforded to their elders in their younger years, such as secure employment, affordable housing and a stable climate.

In the context of this call for a renewed focus on the civic potential of schooling, teachers in Australia (and elsewhere) are also forging their identities in response to the ongoing neoliberal transformation of education. As outlined in the literature review (section 3.1.2), this has seen a refashioning of educational values, curriculum and pedagogy as well as the role of teachers in secondary English classrooms (Angus, 2015; Ball, 2003; Connell, 2013). Professional standards (i.e., AITSL standards) and standardised testing regimes (i.e., PISA and NAPLAN) are now part of the lives of English teachers in Australia. These reforms have been introduced in an attempt to regulate and measure teacher performance (Parr et al., 2023). Despite real concerns about burgeoning workload related to compliance (Manuel et al., 2018), a culture of performance is central to the logic of education today which requires teachers to “organize themselves as a response to targets” and hence “set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation” (Ball, 2003, p. 215). Education is increasingly seen not in terms of personal growth or social impact but in terms of achievement in high stakes testing and readiness for employment in a competitive, individualistic academic system (Keddie, 2016).

The reforms imposed on teachers have also had an impact on their practice and identity. Under the weight of testing regimes and an increased spotlight on teacher “quality” (Crome, 2022; Mockler, 2020; Shine, 2015), more and more teachers are ‘teaching to the test’ and narrowing their pedagogy to maximise test performance (O’Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020; Polesel et al., 2014). While this study does not object to the systematic assessment of learning, the current fixation on performance in reading and writing on tests means that despite being part of the English curriculum, speaking and listening are largely overlooked (Ollerhead, 2022) – so too the scope for “authentic, contextualised, student-centred pedagogy” (Carter et al., 2018, p. 151). As a result, many English teachers yearn for such a personal engagement with students and a socially responsive approach to teaching (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013)

but feel constrained by the demands of external assessments (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020); they feel a professional tension between “a rich conception of English that values affective and individual responses and the pragmatic requirement for test readiness” (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020, p. 233). With their professional beliefs and identities on the line, teachers are wrestling with the new circumstances they find themselves in (Brown et al., 2021; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020). As a result, what it means to be an English teacher in Australia today continues to be a matter of substantial contestation.

With these contexts and countervailing developments in mind, I draw together themes from my data which serve to paint a picture of the identities of my participants as English teachers. As outlined above, the assumption underpinning this endeavour is that questions of identity matter to practice. In the discussion below, I address each theme in turn: ‘Empowering young people’ (4.2); ‘We’re doing them an injustice’ (4.3); and ‘The power of discussion’ (4.4). I draw on data in the form of transcripts of interviews with five teachers in my study: David, Francesca, Dimble, Polly and Sanja. The first theme describes the social and civic purposes that my participants see in English teaching – drawing on their personal and professional experiences and values. The second theme brings together teachers’ critical reflections about the nature of the curriculum and classroom practices as they pertain to preparing students for a media rich world. Finally, the third theme relates to the perceptions about the role and value of dialogue for teachers both in and outside the classroom. Taken together, the findings show how these teachers are motivated by a desire to contribute to the development of their students as informed, open-minded and articulate members of society who can communicate effectively with others about the issues that face them.

4.2 Empowering young people

In this section, I detail the findings related to the theme, ‘Empowering young people’. This theme describes the ways in which my participants connect their teaching with a wider social agenda of empowering students to be informed and engaged citizens. In reading and re-reading the data, it

became clear to me that teachers in my study see their role as contributing to their students' ability to integrate into and participate in a democratic society as active, critical, and informed members of that society (Education Council, 2019). In each case, the participants locate their identities as teachers beyond a neoliberal framing of education as the generation of human and economic capital (Connell, 2013). In what follows, I break down the discussion of themes in two parts: *(i) Finding a place and voice in society* and *(ii) Fostering critical thinking, curiosity and world knowledge*. Each of these parts describes different ways that the teachers saw their work as contributing to the empowerment of their students.

4.2.1 Finding a place and a voice in society

On the one hand, teachers see their work as helping students find a place in society. Dimble was perhaps the most explicit in connecting his teaching to democratic citizenship. He views teaching as something greater than a job or mere form of employment. Rather, he sees English teaching as bound up with questions of citizenship, and he regards himself as an “activist” – in fitting with the first theme – striving to empower students with the sorts of democratic skills and experiences they need to participate in democracy. In adopting almost religious language, he advanced a unique view of teaching among the participants – arguing that “teaching’s something of a higher calling than just a profession.” In outlining his aims and how he sees his own practice, he elaborated further that “my goal is to actually strive to sort of teach the way the world should be.” When explaining what he hopes to achieve as an English teacher, he remarked that he aims to “engage [students] as democratic citizens and become involved in as democratic or democratic-like engagements before they leave school.” This view of teaching for the way the world ought to be resonates with his own family history. Indeed, Dimble admitted the way he views English teaching is in part reflective of a legacy of his father who was a “hard-working union man” and his mother as a public school assistant principal.

Like Dimble, David frames his work as an EAL teacher in terms of integration into a political system and culture. He sees his role as helping students develop the language skills, cultural resources and

dispositions they need to effectively navigate life in Australia. As an EAL teacher, David is particularly sensitive to the needs of his students as they enter a new society. In this way, he affirmed that EAL teachers are not just educators but “trusted staff members” who have an “added level of responsibility towards them in terms of supporting them [students] with integrating into the school and just navigating a new culture.” This vision of social integration is tied to a socially engaged account of his work as an EAL teacher. In my interview with him, he argued that EAL teachers play a “special” role when compared to other teachers – remarking that, “I think we play a really really important role because...there's a level of sort of pastoral care that we provide for our students.” This sensitivity to the personal journey of his students and his personal responsibility to them as they navigate a new country matters because it serves as a pretext for a more expansive vision for English teaching outside of the decontextualised language of accountability and test results that is found in contemporary discourses around literacy teaching (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013).

In addition to finding their place in society, participants stressed the need to help students find their voice. Polly in particular sees her work extending beyond the four walls of the classroom and the narrow objectives of academic achievement. She positions the study of English as a vehicle through which students can develop critical thinking and learn to communicate with others. As a clear example of the first theme, Polly described English as an area of study through which students can become empowered to relate to others and the world around them with confidence. She made an appeal to empowerment early in our interview. Speaking of how she came to teaching, Polly noted that “I’ve always wanted to have a voice and to...critique the world I live in.” This desire to help others develop a strong voice is ultimately what drove her to switch from working in the theatre to schools, where she felt she could “empower young people with something a little bit more concrete than...a one off experience in the theatre.” In reflecting on her choice, Polly regarded the study of English as both a

“vehicle via which we can study the whole spectrum of the human experience” and a space in which people can learn to “communicate within their own little worlds as human beings.”

In connecting the themes of empowerment and the power of discussion, Polly is driven to support her students to find ways to express and articulate their ideas. Helping students find what she termed “vehicles to say what they’re thinking” benefits society. As she pointed out, “It’s not so much ultimately about the individual. It’s about the kind of world I want to live in where with, with people who know how to process our thoughts and put words to our thoughts.” In some ways, her comments resonate with official curriculum rationales for the study of English which at least purport to aim for the development of “confident communicators” who are able to “build relationships with others and with the world around them” (ACARA, 2021b, para. 1).

The importance Polly places on communication in English has much deeper roots beyond compliance, and instead lies in her personal experiences of working with prisoners. Early in our interview when we discussed how she came to teaching, she described her work doing theatrical productions with young offenders in London. In this context, she noted how these young offenders would struggle to communicate with their own children.

I saw prisoners – young boys who are fathers – on a visit, and I saw their kids coming in, and they were often seventeen-eighteen these boys, but they had little kids, and they didn't know how to talk to their little boys... It was, it was heartbreaking to see these men that we knew had interesting things to say about Gulliver, not know how to play with their kids. It was cos they hadn't had anyone role model that.

This image of the young prisoner who struggles to express themselves and communicate effectively with others permeated our interview. When I asked how she described her work as a teacher, Polly described herself as a positive adult role model. She remarked that “Whenever I walk into the classroom, I want kids to think: this is a grown-up who knows about the world. I feel like I’m role modelling good adult

behaviour.” In many ways, then, running through Polly’s view of English teaching is an idea of her practice as kind of socially restorative practice for vulnerable young people. In this context, for Polly discussing current issues is tied up with developing people skills and learning to engage with other people in civilised ways.

Similar to Polly, Francesca positions her work as facilitating the development and communication of ideas. When asked in the interview how she views her practice, she presented a tripartite breakdown of what this means. She remarked she is trying to help students to “formulate their own ideas, to express their own ideas eloquently, and then to respect the ideas of others.” This is part of her desire to “equip them to be able to... figure out how they’re interfacing with the world” as well as “how [students] dialogue with other people.” Francesca has a holistic view of the communication of ideas and includes under that aspiration all forms of expression including essay writing as well as face to face classroom interactions. This allows her to locate classroom discussion about a range of topics and issues in the media as part of much larger picture of student development. Moreover, like the other participants, there is something about her interest in the conception and communication of ideas that connects with Francesca’s professional background in writing, editing and book sales – domains that celebrate the production and dissemination of human thought

4.2.2 Fostering critical thinking, curiosity and world knowledge

For David, Polly and Sanja, empowerment is not just associated with the development of communication skills and integration into a new society but also the facilitation of critical thinking and curiosity. David expressed a high regard for critical thinking and curiosity. At the end of the section of the interview where he gave an account of his own practice, he remarked that, “I value.... encouraging students to, question things and to think critically.” Moreover, as will be discussed in the next chapter, David holds regular Friday ‘news conferences’ (as he terms them) with his EAL class, which involve

students bringing a news report to class and then presenting and discussing the issues it relates to with the rest of the class. In regard to how this activity generates curiosity, he stated that:

I'm trying to...develop curiosity in students most of all cos I think that that's really important, and I think that it just enriches society when people are curious... curious about each other about different people's experiences, about the world, about politics and about... just how the world works in general.

For David, there are also social and pedagogical benefits to encouraging curiosity within this student-led approach. That is to say that when students bring *their own* news texts to class and when classroom discussion is guided by *their* questions about issues this can lead to students playing a more active role in the co-construction of knowledge and in the development of communication skills that happen through their participation in the learning. This approach also resonates with the topics for professional development at his school. At the time of the interview, David explained that his school had a big focus on developing student agency, global competency and literacy.

Importantly for this study, David associated the values he places on critical thinking and curiosity with his own past educational experience of engaging in rich classroom dialogue. At one point in our interview, after I had invited him to look back at past inspiration for the importance he places on critical thinking, he recalled teachers at his school who “sort of stick in your mind as being ones who encouraged that or sort of enabled that to happen – just sort of questioning things...looking at things from a critical perspective.” Likewise, he remembered that the open discussion of issues in his own education as an English student was “important – that opportunity to talk about different issues and to be challenged and to look at different perspectives.” David’s use of the phrase, ‘that opportunity to talk’ suggests a possible awareness that such discussions are rewarding but rare in a contemporary school context where speaking and listening take second place to reading and writing (Ollerhead, 2022). It

further suggests that that such exchanges at school are part of what it means to be empowered, to be prepared for democratic life.

Like David, in advancing a vision for education anchored in student voice and empowerment, Polly places great value on fostering students' critical thinking. In describing her classroom ethos, Polly remarked that, "we'll often talk about ignorance – we're battling ignorance." Alongside this, though, there is a strong sense of criticality running through her work. Discussing news and current issues in her classroom, she believes, helps the students see how power works in society and its impact on them. Her allusion to Orwell in our interview was telling. When asked why it was important for her students to know what is happening in the news, she remarked: "I think it's, you know, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – all those texts that one has read about ignorance. You know, when you when you're controlled and you stop thinking for yourself, disaster looms."

Sanja shared a similar view of the need to break down ignorance through exposing students to ideas that they otherwise wouldn't encounter. In many ways, she views English teachers as social, cultural and political guides to the world who empower students by exposing them to ideas, texts and issues. On this account, in our interview, she implicitly positioned herself as a knowledgeable 'other' (Vygotskiĭ, 1987) in this case possessing embodied and nuanced knowledge through life experience. As a highly educated, mature age migrant having experienced conflict in South Eastern Europe, Sanja came to Australia with a significant amount of life experience and a professional background as an interpreter.

This life and intercultural experience shapes how she sees her role. She identified this early in the interview – noting that the first school she worked at in Australia recognised that she had "experience – life experience – and teaching experience." She also regards life experience as the particular value of the teacher. When assessing students' ability to interpret complex texts, she remarked, "Yes, they have knowledge. Yes, they could have high intelligence. But where is the, the life experience? And then I think that is the value of the teacher." This emphasis on personal life experience challenges the centrality of

academic knowledge that transcends the classroom and the personal lives of students (Doecke et al., 2021) and technicist accounts of teacher expertise in contemporary teaching and learning (Hattie, 2009). The point also reinforces Polly's view that in addition to expertise about literacy, English teachers can ultimately offer students a role model of a stable and literate adult.

From a pedagogical point of view, the value of personal experience seems to shape Sanja's desire to expose students to a range of worldviews. This is demonstrated in her discussion of reading at her school. In reflecting on her school's approach to reading that emphasises the acquisition of skills, she argued that students also need exposure to a range of texts. In outlining her view on the school's approach to readings, she stated:

I am more about experience, whereas literacy lessons are more structured going in depth in terms of *how* they read...but given our cohort of students when they don't have exposure to different either text or um experiences, I think it's very valuable. And that was my input in their thinking – expose them, expose you know variety of text, expose different culture, experience different issues.

Insofar as it is possible to extend her views on reading to English teaching at large, Sanja seemed to be arguing that developing students' literacy comes not only through helping them develop skills but also expanding horizons and building a broad base of knowledge about the world.

In sum, the participants in my study see their English teaching as contributing to formation of their students as knowledgeable and active citizens. This involves building the sorts of skills and dispositions that are valuable for social and political life. They want their students to be informed, to think critically about the world around them and to be interested in the views of others – all of which are facilitated through classroom dialogue. As a consequence, the participating teachers are well-disposed to see the merit in promoting dialogue. Importantly, in emphasising English teaching's relationship to social life, they position their work in ways that run contrary to neoliberal views of teaching as preparation for economic participation and the production of human capital for the market – humanizing the profession

and resisting the commodification of teaching and learning (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011) and the life of 'calculation' (Ball, 2003) that attend the profession today.

4.3 We're doing them an injustice

One of the arguments I have been advancing is that conversations about current issues may be difficult to enact in practice today. This is because, as noted earlier, many teachers are under immense pressure to narrow their teaching (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020; Polesel et al., 2014) to 'what works' in order to optimise test scores. The effect of this is not to say that teachers cannot engage in dialogue with their students about current issues, but that the space to be creative, respond to students and 'go off script' is limited. Given this, several teachers in my study found themselves challenging the state of the profession today and the implications of a narrow focus on reading and writing for testing purposes in English. These teachers were particularly aware of the challenges their students face in forming relationships and navigating a complex media landscape. In what follows, I break this down further into two parts: 'challenging the status quo' and 'preparing students for the real world.' Running through the discussion is a sense that the English teachers see a need for change in the profession.

4.3.1 *Challenging the status quo*

Part of making space for dialogue about current issues is seeing how they fit in relation to the English teaching profession. In this way, Dimble expressed his concern that the profession's focus on testing and reading was taking away from opportunities for students to interact with each other. He expressed shock at English teaching colleagues at his school who appear to be more concerned with the quality of student handwriting than questions related to the challenging media environment surrounding students. As he put it, some staff meetings at his school would "degenerate into people saying...you know, kids' handwriting isn't any good" without thinking about the fact that the "whole world's information [is] at [their] fingertips." Moreover, at a poignant moment in our interview, he recalled

experiences of talking with disgruntled students who wanted to move classes, but who did not know the names of their peers. Clearly disturbed by this situation, he remarked:

I think part of...that issue should be laid a seat of pedagogy – like what kind of... teaching would mean that you're never actually interacting with anyone in the room except for you and the teacher and maybe some shoulder buddies on either side of you? So I think, it's a bit of a an indictment of the kind of streamlining of our teaching towards reading.

'Reading' here for Dimble seems to signify something more than the activity reading itself. Rather it seems to stand as proxy for a narrowing of the curriculum around what is tested (e.g., reading and writing). What is significant in Dimble's comments here is the sense of social alienation that he sees flowing from the narrowing of the English curriculum around testable skills, and he senses the injustice for students in this. Indeed, Dimble acknowledges that professional adaptation is key to making space for wide ranging discussions in English classrooms today. In acknowledging the limits placed on teachers, he argued that finding the time for conversations about news and issues requires negotiation and balance. Speaking of the role of discussions in his classroom, he remarked that:

We have a great deal of autonomy but within quite narrow bounds, and so it's the kind of thing that I look forward to including when possible. And.... it's obviously something you kind of have to juggle against the various [policy or curriculum] documents that require other things. A lot of writing, basically, in the English curriculum...you know, you can't speak or listen on the exam, so it's always going to be something that as a result is lessened, minimized.

Dimble's sentiments echo those of his colleagues across the nation. He acknowledges the marginalisation of oral communication in English classrooms – brought about by the influence of external standardised testing (Ollerhead, 2022). Likewise, the “juggle” he performs in order to make space for discussions embodies the tension that many English teachers experience in Australia between helping their students do well on high-stakes assessments and facilitating rich and engaging learning

experiences (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020). Ultimately, to resolve this dilemma, Dimble argues not for curriculum reform but for a reduction in excessive workload (Manuel et al., 2018) – he feels this would allow teachers to respond to students in more authentic ways. As he puts it, “I foresee...a world where teachers have enough time to actually care.”

David too sensed that the rush in getting students ready for exams reduces the scope for dialogue about current issues. He made the case that “there's just not a lot of time to look at different issues in much depth.” Yet, according to him, this was not inevitable, but the result of curriculum choices. In other words, his unique position as a teacher working across VCE and IB in an independent school serving an affluent community in south east Melbourne allows him to see that different curriculum settings can enable or constrain opportunities for conversations about issues in the media that matter to students. In light of this, he had a lot of positive things to say about the way that the IB is structured around key themes in such a way that there is opportunity to build depth of knowledge and integrate a range of resources and learning experiences that speak to students’ interests. As result, he noted that in the IB English program, “there's a lot more opportunities for really rich discussions about all sorts of things”. In contrast, he lamented the narrow focus on language and the use of what is deemed to be de-contextualised texts in the VCE curriculum – a reference perhaps to exam texts that are written for a broad audience and of a general nature rather than being tied to current particular issues studied in class. As a result of this, for David the VCE curriculum constrains opportunities for classroom discussion and inquiry that foster knowledge and a critical mindset toward media.

In reflecting on the state of the profession and as a teacher of both IB and VCE in his school, David understands the role that curriculum can play in enabling opportunities for promoting dialogue about current issues. In listing the affordances of the IB program, he provides what Connell (2013) calls an “institutional articulation” (p. 99) of an alternative vision of education. In other words, he understands that there are institutional ways of unlocking time and space in classrooms for the sorts of deep

discussions that my study clearly values. In doing so, he highlights the arbitrariness of existing practices for the vast majority of schools in Victoria, and this in turn suggests that a decline in teacher creativity and agency among English teachers today (Brown et al., 2021; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020) is not universal, but rather the result of particular curriculum and assessment choices.

4.3.2 Preparing students for the 'real' world

Teachers in my study were acutely aware of the need to prepare their students to navigate a world of misinformation. In many ways this starts with the sorts of texts students are exposed to. Several participants noted the absence of what they deemed 'real world' texts in the curriculum. This point is made by Dimble who lamented texts in VCE that are "devoid of context" – a reference, perhaps like David, to the generalised nature of exam texts. At one point in his career as an English teacher he came to realise that many of the media texts he was using in VCE classes "weren't especially real" and now since that point he has tried to "incorporate texts that are meaningful to young people." This includes using TikTok videos at the start of lessons as well as studying news media texts that speak to local issues such as changing the name of a local council because the name of the council has historical connections to slavery.

In addition to this concern, David and Francesca expressed their desire to help their students work through the pitfalls of a changing media landscape. David senses a particular deficit in the curriculum with respect to media education. In my interview with him, he called for "explicit discussions of news in English classes," and for the integration of texts that are relevant to students – questioning the prominence of letters to the editor and opinion pieces.

[Students are] bombarded with a lot of information from different sources through social media and through online platforms...and I'm just not sure whether they're getting the skills from school to be able to...look at those sources and evaluate them for credibility or accuracy....Like how do they

interrogate those sorts of sources? We're not – I don't think the curriculum really allows for that as much in VCE. And I think it should.

David's concern that students are increasingly prone to manipulation in their online interactions is also a sentiment shared by other teachers and researchers across Australia (Corser et al., 2021; Nettlefold & Williams, 2018). Crucially, his concerns are reflective of a concern for students' ability to be informed citizens in a way that connects back to the theme of empowerment.

Francesca is equally passionate about creating space in her practice for dialogue about current issues in the media. Francesca feels strongly about the need for the curriculum to be relevant to the lives of her students. In doing so, like Dimble, she works pragmatically with curriculum mandates. In contrast to other participants, however, she does not see the curriculum as preventing her from having discussions about news and issues with her students. At one point in our interview, she acknowledged that while the syllabus is "crowded" and while their class might talk about stories and issues news on an irregular basis, she saw these conversation as "part of the curriculum." This is a point which is perhaps a reflection of her school's systematic and explicit encouragement of collaborative learning, communication and others skills she deemed as "twenty-first century soft skills."

While she does not see a conflict between her teaching and the curriculum, she does see a need to "anchor the curriculum in the real world" and hence achieve an "education for life." In her view, the narrowing focus on test performance presents a serious error of judgment. In articulating the third theme outlined above, she formulated this position powerfully to other participants in the focus groups, remarking that "we're kind of doing them an injustice by just repeatedly drilling essay writing – not addressing the Tweet that they're seeing or the...Tik Tok phenomenon on their phone." Here Francesca makes a strong case for classroom dialogue about media from an

point of view. Specifically, her comment can be read as a counter narrative to the reified notions of teacher accountability today in the sense that teachers who spend time addressing topics and events in

news are not wasting time but rather responding to a deeper moral imperative to respond to their students (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013).

Like David, Francesca is also concerned about the perceived lack of news media literacy among students. Her commitment to a real life syllabus translates into her embedding news media literacy in her teaching. In our interview, she reflected on her creation of a news media literacy unit for junior secondary students. Reflecting on how it came to be, she noted that she developed it in response to her shock at students unquestioningly accepting online information. Realising that she had been operating under the assumption that her students were 'digital natives,' she remarked that "I quickly realised that, sure, building up a knowledge of classical literature and passing on cultural heritage is important in an English classroom, but actually...what's equally if not more important is the idea of critical literacy and critical discussions." In stressing the value of teaching both the canon and critical literacy, Francesca demonstrates an awareness of the competing literacy discourses that surround the teaching of English in the media (Snyder, 2008). Similarly, like other secondary English teachers, she is able to adapt and exercise her professional agency (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020).

By and large then teachers in my study see beyond the narrow confines of what is testable. These teachers are driven by a concern for their students; they demonstrate a responsiveness to their needs (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013) – in particular concerns about their students' ability to navigate misinformation. Where there were criticisms by the teachers of the curriculum, these seemed to relate to features of the senior VCE curriculum and the culture of relentless testing more broadly. Teachers in the study seemed wary of approaches to English teaching that fixate on preparing for and delivering test results using what they, at least in their experience, perceive to be de-contextualised texts. While they meet their professional obligations to teach the curriculum as it stands, they seek to make it 'real' for their students through furnishing the opportunity to talk about the sorts of texts and debates that their students see every day on social media and in the news. In attempting to ground their teaching in the

lives of students, they reflect a critical, Freirean ethos (Freire, 1972). At the same time, having the freedom to select texts that are meaningful to students means that a dialogic space is more easily accessible to all their students.

4.4 The power of discussion

Building on the findings from the last two chapters, all of the participants in my study appreciated the value of classroom dialogue. They grasped the power of discussion, and saw different benefits associated with it. These benefits ranged from communicative benefits through to epistemological and relational benefits. This appreciation allowed them to embrace and promote dialogue in their classes.

Some participants were acutely aware of the communicative benefits that classroom dialogue brings. This was particularly the case for one EAL teacher, David. At the core of David's vision for helping his students make a successful cultural transition is language acquisition and the development of English language necessary to "succeed in school and also to succeed in life more generally." His appreciation for the importance of language acquisition is shaped by his own professional background. Early in the interview with me, he established his professional background in multicultural media and his pathway to teaching through studying history and linguistics. In both cases, he was acutely aware of ways in which language can give people access to new communities. With this imperative in mind, when asked about his views on the role of discussion in teaching and learning, he remarked that each classroom discussion is a "great opportunity for students to develop their speaking and listening skills...for students to listen to different perspectives and... to learn from each other." In emphasising the importance of speaking and listening to learning, he makes a bridge between communication skills and more epistemological benefits associated with viewing dialogue as an interplay of voices (Bakhtin, 1981; Lefstein & Snell, 2013).

Several other participants highlighted the epistemological benefits of dialogue. Francesca's desire to help empower her students to formulate and communicate their ideas corresponds to the value she

places on classroom discussion. She described discussion variously as “one of the most important tools in the English classroom” and a ‘germinating’ process through which ideas can be generated, and “cross-pollinated with someone’s counterpoint or someone adding back to it” –the result being that “you end up with a stronger idea.” Clearly, Francesca sees discussion as a generative tool. This suggests that she sees knowledge as constructed and refined through exchange – a position that resonates with a Socratic view of dialogue and the sociocultural literature on dialogic approaches to teaching and learning (Alexander, 2020; Cui & Teo, 2021; Mercer & Dawes, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012). As noted earlier, it also resonates with her background in publishing – a role that requires developing and refining texts and ideas.

The cognitive benefits Francesca associates with classroom discussion are buttressed by the personal value she derives from speaking and listening to others. She noted that “there's something about it – whether that's true or not – that feels authentic and I feel like I've been involved in sort of making my own connection.” For Francesca, this allows for a more inclusive and engaged classroom. She stated that “I really do want to make sure that students are feeling like they’re part of something – that they’re part of the learning, rather than the learning being enacted on them.” These comments are more than just about getting students interested in learning. They also reflect a particular approach to knowledge that resonates with debates about teaching today. Specifically, Francesca seems to appreciate that classroom dialogue is based on the view that knowledge is something produced with others in context, and this is in contrast to a top-down approach that sees knowledge as something that is passed on to students (Doecke et al., 2021; Yandell, 2017).

In addition to these epistemological benefits, other participants saw classroom dialogue as a powerful way of initiating them into a political community. With a class of senior students studying the VCE subject English language, Dimble reflected on the pedagogic and democratic power of having them engage in and reflect on regular discussions about media texts they are studying. He noted that as part

of their reflection, they have sophisticated “discussions about what it means to be...a citizen and...a human being interacting with other human beings around knowledge.” In his view, structuring discussion in this way allows him to develop the analytical skills students need as part of the unit and at the same time reflect on what it means to be a citizen. In his words, “that’s the exciting part...you can easily say that they’re reading articles and they’re doing all the other stuff, but they’re kind of doing two things at once” (i.e., analysing texts for curriculum purposes and engaging in democratic discussions). The quote is telling about the value of dialogue to the development of literacy (Wilkinson et al., 2020). It is also indicative of the pragmatic ways that English teachers organise their work to meet the demands of seemingly competing priorities – here between profound reflections on the nature of democratic participation and ‘the other stuff’ required by the unit’s study design. In doing this, Dimble is demonstrating adaptive agency (O’Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020) in that he envisions a way to both meet curriculum demands and engage in thinking that aligns with the value he places on democratic education.

Classroom dialogue is also seen by participants as a powerful way to expand the minds of students. Sanja remarked that such conversations about issues in the news can overcome what she perceives to be students’ perceived ignorance: young people can be “very superficial” and “very individualistic...where they care for what’s good for them.” Crucially, she warned that a lack of awareness about what is happening in society can lead to students experiencing their lives as their “own island...caring for [their] own business and never feel real connection to the world that [they] live with.” With this in mind, Sanja’s concerns are well-founded: helping students forge a ‘connection to the world’ around them is of fundamental interest not only to society but to the students themselves.

In the context of Sanja’s characterisation of what she sees as young people’s shallow self-obsession, she lauded the fact, as she sees it, that there is always “an invitation to talk” in Australian schools. She regarded conversations with students not only as a way to assess student learning but always as a way

for students to share and learn from one another. Likewise, while she recognised that it is not a school priority, and while she is also sceptical about the capacity of schools to keep pace with the flow of news, she “would like to see it much more” – the teaching about news. The reason for this is that such discussions can help orient students outwards toward others. As she put it, “Knowing the news, knowing the world around you, knowing community in which you live, there are more ways to understand it and help it to become better.” What appears to be at stake for Sanja, then, in classroom conversations about current issues in the media is not merely literacy but a concern for community and questions of the public good.

In all, the teachers appreciated the communicative, epistemological and political benefits of classroom dialogue. They see classroom exchanges in particular as a tool to develop critical thinking, and a way to make authentic connections through learning from peers. These ideas would appear to have an enduring place in English teachers’ stance and pedagogy. Yet they are not entirely supported in a neoliberal system which formulates knowledge as something handed down by teachers who are seen as the experts (Doecke et al., 2021; Yandell, 2017). In this way, the striving for authenticity, the recognition that students have something to contribute, reinforces the view that the participating teachers’ philosophical foundations for English teaching lie beyond a neoliberal frame.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to understand how teachers in my study conceptualise and position their work. In doing so, I have tied questions of practice to professional identity. This approach is based on the assumption that what teachers can do is linked to questions of their identity, including how educators see themselves and their work (Brown et al., 2021; Buchanan, 2015). In analysing their interview transcripts, I have looked closely at the beliefs and values of the participants in relation to three themes identified in the process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2019b): ‘Empowering young people’; ‘We’re doing them an injustice’; and ‘The power of discussion.’ What runs

through these themes is a sense that the teachers in my study believe English teaching cannot be divorced from the world around the classroom. While each participant is unique, from the analysis provided, it is possible to posit a range of arguments about who they are and how they see their work as English teachers, and the impact this has on classroom dialogue about current issues in the media.

First of all, what is striking about the participating teachers is the way that their beliefs about their work can be linked to their own personal history (Mockler, 2011). Polly sees her work as an English teacher in terms of being an a role model of a literate and flourishing adult – linked to her previous experience working with young offenders in London. Dimble sees his himself as an activist wanting to expose his students to as many democratic activities as they can before leaving school. His activism resonates with his family heritage of union membership and public school leadership. Francesca on the other hand sees her role as helping students to see how they are interfacing with the world – the idea of linking people with ideas connecting with her past in publishing. As an EAL teacher, David sees his role as helping students develop the language required to integrate into a new culture – and this resonates with his previous work in the field of multicultural media. Likewise, Sanja sets out to expand the minds of her students to show them there are always different ways of seeing the world – a position reflective of her work as an interpreter. In each case then, the teachers bring something personal to their work as an English teacher. Their lives outside of schools seem to underly their view that English teaching should help students connect with the world beyond the classroom.

The second point to note is that teachers in my study believe strongly in a personally responsive approach to English teaching. From an ethical point of view, they are guided by a professional ethics that is oriented to the interests, questions and concerns of their students (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013). The ‘calls’ my participants address include Francesca’s and David’s fears that their students were not being prepared for a digital media landscape awash with fake news and misinformation. Likewise, the argument is demonstrated in the ways David, Dimble and Francesca prioritise discussion of texts and

issues in news media that interest students. In each case, teachers keep students at the centre of all they do. They appear to be spurred on by a sense of care for the young people they teach and this accords with what drives many of their colleagues around Australia (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020). In a personal way, then, their teaching is underpinned by qualities and values that are important to dialogue such as a concern, affection and responsiveness (Burbules, 1993).

In addition, several teachers in this study have a vision of the social purpose of English teaching. Teachers like Polly and Francesca and David see what they do in terms of facilitating the ability of students to articulate themselves and communicate ideas. David understands the significant role that he plays in helping EAL students integrate into academic and national communities. Likewise, Polly, Dimble and Sanja see the democratic importance of their work – from empowering student voice to developing knowledge about societies and cultures through to engaging students in classroom experiences that prepare them for civic life. In each case, the social and political dimensions are not accidental or incidental but central to how they conceptualise what they do as secondary English teachers. In doing so, they position both who they are and what they do beyond neoliberal discourses of performativity, human capital formation and job preparedness (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2013; Keddle, 2016).

While the participants adopt different positions in relation to the curriculum, they are critical of aspects of the culture of English teaching today. David, who has experience teaching across different curriculum programs, argues that the VCE curriculum constrains opportunities for critical, student-centred inquiry into topics and debates at a senior level. Despite this, the participants were not entirely critical of the curriculum itself. Dimble sees a problem not with the curriculum but in a burdensome workload which prevents teacher from really caring for their students. Similarly, Francesca sees alignment between dialogue about current issues and the objectives of the curriculum. Her positive framing of the curriculum may be reflective of her school's system-wide emphasis on collaboration. With the exception of David, then, teachers in my study position themselves not necessarily against the

curriculum per se but aspects of what they see as the culture of standardisation, evident in the use of ‘unreal’ texts, the relentless pace and demands of teaching at senior levels, and the focus on test readiness.

In the emphasis on care, responsiveness and the social purpose of English teaching, the findings from this chapter echo O’Sullivan and Goodwyn’s (2020) observation that the way teachers and authorities conceive of English teaching professionalism in Australia differs markedly. Granted, this may be reflective of the nature of the topic and questions asked of participants during interviews and focus groups. And yet, it is still evident that English teaching for my participants involves a much more expansive vision than helping students learn to read and write in standardised ways in order to get a job and contribute to the growth economy. While none of them downplays the importance of reading and writing, the teachers nonetheless connect their work in English to the development of knowledge and skills about communication, news media and democracy which they believe their students need in order to have rich and flourishing lives as citizens. In this context, these findings suggest that dialogue about current issues is not superfluous to requirements but part of what it means to teach English and to *be* an English teacher.

Finally, from the perspective of generating a dialogic space, the ways teachers position their work could also be said to pre-dispose them to embracing forms of dialogic pedagogy. From a philosophical point of view, they value critical thinking, curiosity, and having students feeling part of the learning. They also appreciate the exchange of ideas as a way to learn from others and generate new and better thinking about problems. As Sanja points out, dialogue about current issues also has political implications. In echoes of Arendt (2018), she argues that such exchanges orient people away from their private lives and toward public life. This positioning of turning to and seeing value in ‘the other’ is at the heart of dialogue (Buber, 2013) and the study’s aim to address the deterioration in public discourse. In

doing so, genuinely appreciating what others say fosters the sort of active and informed citizenship envisaged as the goal of the Australian education system (Education Council, 2019).

But what does all of this mean in practice? In moving from the philosophical to the practical, the next chapter explores the practicalities of generating dialogue about current issues in English classrooms.

Chapter 5 – The practicalities of generating classroom dialogue about current issues

5.1 Introduction

In the previous Findings chapter, I described and analysed the identities, beliefs and values of the participating teachers. In short, I found that the teachers were motivated by an expansive and personally responsive approach to teaching English that did not fit neatly into the contemporary neoliberal discourses surrounding teachers' work and education. Further, they were acutely aware of the importance of teaching students about news media, and they grasped the democratic importance of helping their students learn to communicate with their peers and others beyond the classroom about a range of issues. Whereas the previous chapter was more philosophical in nature, this one and the one that follows are more practice-focused. Specifically, in this chapter, my purpose is to describe how English teachers in my study actually go about promoting dialogue in their classrooms – that is to say, how they generate dialogue about current issues in the media.

In analysing teachers' practices in this chapter, I describe what teachers say and do, and how they relate to their students. This way of seeing practice adopts Kemmis et al.'s (2014) view that classroom practices consist of an arrangement of *sayings*, *doings*, and *relatings* that “hang together” (p. 35) as a project, and which are licenced and shaped by particular cultural discourses, material resources and social arrangements. These sayings, doings and relatings are situated within and shaped by particular school and classroom contexts. Given that my data includes various allusions to, as well as brief narratives of, practice by teachers in conversation with me and other participants, I approach the data with the intention of documenting this patchwork of practice by treating anything the teachers report saying, doing or the sorts of relationships they report establishing in their classrooms as indications of their practice.

The specific dimension of practice that I am focusing on here is facilitating dialogue about current issues playing out in the media. As noted in the methodology chapter, from a theoretical point of view, I am interested in seeing these classroom conversations as holding out the possibility of meaning something more than just words and sounds. As such, I approach the generation of dialogue as the potential creation of a dialogic space (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2008; Wegerif & Major, 2019). In making sense of the purpose of these interactions, I draw on Lefstein and Snell's (2020) analytical framework of different dialogic traditions. From an epistemological point of view, they argue that dialogue involves an interplay of voices (Bakhtin, 1981), thinking together (Mercer, 2000; Vygotskii, 1987) and a critical, Socratic exchange involved in establishing truth claims. From a relational point of view, dialogue can also be seen in terms of generating non-instrumental or objectifying I-You relationships (Buber, 1937) built on "respect, mutual concern and solidarity" (Lefstein & Snell, 2013, p. 18). Finally, from a political perspective, dialogue represents a form of political action through which we seek to bring ourselves and others into the world (Arendt, 2018), and it is a process through which educators and students can develop critical consciousness about power that may lead to what Freire (1972) characterised as emancipation.

For the sake of analytical efficiency, I have grouped the dimensions together into three different strands: (i) dialogue as a way of being and relating (e.g., relationships and an interplay of voices); (ii) dialogue as a way of thinking with others (e.g., thinking together and critique); and (iii) dialogue as civic engagement (e.g., empowerment and political action). What these strands have in common is the generation of a space in which people value each other and their differences, all the while engaging in careful and informed sharing of views. Building on this work, my overarching aim in this chapter is to understand how teachers in my study open a dialogic space in which these strands of dialogue can be modelled and encouraged. This involves understanding how they build a supportive classroom where students are responsive to each other. It also means understanding how they build the sorts of

communication skills which enable students to exchange views about current issues in the media with confidence and clarity. From a practical point of view, it also means gleaning how current issues become a topic for conversation in the classroom in the first place, as well as how exchanges are initiated and sustained.

In order to understand how participants in my study carry out this work, I draw on four themes from my data analysis of interviews and focus group. These themes contain illustrations of practice - that is, sayings, relatings and doings in context (Kemmis et al., 2014). In this chapter, I have divided the discussion into two sections containing two of each of the themes. In the first section, which I title 'Opening a space for dialogue' (5.2). I include the theme, 'Bringing news into the classroom' (5.2.1), which describes how the teachers make what is happening in the news a topic for dialogue in the classroom. Following from this, the theme, 'Playing the demigod' (5.2.2), describes how teachers generate classroom dialogue and the role they see themselves playing in this. In the second section, 'Building a dialogic classroom' (5.3), I look more broadly at how classroom exchanges about current issues are underpinned by the creation of a conducive environment for dialogue. In this section, I unpack the theme, 'It's fragile but we've got it' (5.3.1), in which I examine the importance of establishing classroom conditions that unlock powerful conversations, and I describe the ways that teachers build and maintain relationships, norms and expectations with students that enable rich dialogue to occur. Associated with this, I also explore the fourth theme, 'Working from the bottom up and across' (5.3.2), which investigates the ongoing work that goes into building a communicative classroom.

5.2 Opening a space for dialogue

In this first section, I describe how participants in my study integrate texts and initiate dialogue about issues in the news into English classrooms. Put simply, I seek to understand both how issues in the media may become a purposeful topic of conversation in the first place, as well as how teachers actually conduct such exchanges. To borrow the metaphor from my methodology section, I am exploring how

teachers open up a space for dialogue about news and issues. As noted in the introduction, from statistical surveys, many teachers in Australia report engaging with news media in some way in their classrooms (Nettlefold & Williams, 2018), and yet there is a lack clarity around how it is exactly that students come to encounter news in schools (Corser et al., 2021). This clarity is particularly important for subject English given that research in this area is typically addressed in relation to civics and citizenship classrooms (Fadel & Preston, 2017). My data suggests that teachers can and do actively create curriculum-anchored opportunities for dialogue. Moreover, the way teachers initiate dialogue varies from planned to spontaneous – as do the roles they see themselves playing within them. These points are described in more detail in the following discussion of two themes: ‘Bringing news into the classroom’ and ‘Playing the demigod’.

5.2.1 *Bringing news into the classroom*

Participating teachers showed that, for them, promoting dialogue about current issues involves engaging their students with what is happening with the world around them. In that light, teachers in my study reported different ways to expose their students to what is happening in the news. As noted in the introduction, there are multiple opportunities for students to encounter and hence have conversations about news media throughout the journey of a secondary English student in Victoria. Most prominently, within the Literacy strand of the *Australian Curriculum: English*, students in year nine come to develop a “critical understanding of the contemporary media and the differences between media texts” (ACARA, 2022d, para. 4). As part of this, they are expected to “interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issue[s], event[s], situation[s], individuals or groups are constructed “ (ACARA, 2022d, para. 31). At the senior years of secondary school, there is similar scope for engaging with current issues as part of a larger unit of study. As noted in the previous findings chapter, in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, there is flexibility to cover texts that address key themes of experiences, social organization, human ingenuity, identities and sharing the planet (IB,

2020). Furthermore, in the case of The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) study designs for English and EAL, conversations about current issues in the media are perhaps most likely to occur when studying the analysis of language and argument when studying opinion pieces and the like as part of the syllabus for VCE English.

Reflecting the scope afforded by the Australian Curriculum, one of the main ways that the participating English teachers reported integrating news into the classroom was through a unit dedicated to news media literacy in year nine. A unit about news seemed to make for natural conversations; as Francesca noted, units create “space around [them] to have...discussions.” In separate interviews and in the follow up focus group discussion, Francesca, Polly and Sanja described news media units that they had either developed or taught for junior secondary students. While all three units examine media bias, there appeared to be some key differences. Polly and Sanja reported that their units focus more on newspapers and mainstream news. The unit that Sanja spoke about also seemed to introduce newspapers and associated terminology (e.g., tabloid vs broadsheet) and touched on the consumption of media and its relationship to opinion formation. While in some respects, the focus on newspapers might seem “old-fashioned” as Polly put it, it is important to note that both Sanja and Polly work at a school with enormous cultural diversity. Indeed, Sanja primarily teaches EAL, and so a carefully nuanced introduction to different media sources in Australia also functions as a valuable cultural education for her students.

In contrast to the more traditional but nonetheless valuable approach enacted by Sanja and Polly, Francesca’s unit integrates skills and texts that are highly relevant to the contemporary digital habits of her students. In describing how she starts the unit, she noted that “one of the first lessons is, you know: open up your phone. Land on the first piece of news that comes up in your TikTok feed or your Instagram feed or your Snapchat feed...and let’s sort of use that as our starting point.” The unit she was referring to covers a range of knowledge and skills related to news: from understanding what counts as

news and how to access sources of news, through to how to check texts for reliability and how to have discussions with others about sensitive issues. Moreover, in our conversation Francesca framed the unit around building “critical literacy.” In her case, this seems to be less about examining the politics of texts (Luke, 2012) and more concerned with the representational dimensions of media literacy (Buckingham, 2019). In its focus on evaluating the reliability of information, it resembles a valuable and popular fact-checking approach to news media literacy (Ashley, 2019).

In all three cases, the design of the unit addressing news media opens up valuable opportunities to directly talk not just about issues in the media but also the media itself. As Francesca notes, the units create space for dialogue. Drawing on my theoretical framework, teaching about media and power offers dialogic potential inasmuch as it provides an occasion to engage in an Freirean raising of critical consciousness. That is to say, news media units provide an opportunity to “name the world” in order to “transform it” (Freire, 1972, p. 88). In this way, Francesca’s, Polly’s and Sanja’s teaching demonstrates the powerful role that English teachers have in devising curriculum-based innovations to respond to students and problems they see in society.

In addition to integrating news into their classrooms as part of a unit of study focused on news media, other participants spoke about bringing in news texts in other purposeful ways. Dimble incorporates news reports into the VCE subject he teaches, English Language³. As part of the subject, students learn to “describe and analyse the structures, features and functions of spoken and written English language” (VCAA, 2014, p. 5) through studying contemporary texts. The curriculum documents do not prescribe the sorts of texts to include and this flexibility allows Dimble to bring in a steady feed of news articles. Likewise, David described holding regular “news conferences” every Friday with his small

³ At a senior VCE level, there are a range of English subjects available to students: ‘mainstream’ English/EAL (i.e., study of literature and language/argument analysis), English Language (i.e., study of English language borrowing from linguistics) or English literature.

class of EAL students (see the next section). These regular discussions appear to be tied to the broad aims and ideas of the IB Curriculum. As he put it, the discussions are a:

really good springboard for then talking deeper about some of the things that...are important sort of core to the IB Diploma program. So...I might sort of pose the question: what values do you think underpin this story? Or...what are the values here?"

In both cases, news reports are used as a springboard to thinking about language and values that are core to the VCE and/or IB curriculum programs.

Another pedagogical approach suggested by Polly was using news texts as part of reading instruction. In my interview with her, she described how she uses news reports as part of a reading program. For whole classes, from time to time she sets homework to read a news report after class and then asks students to report back what they read to their peers (and their teacher) at the start of the next lesson. In other cases, she incorporates news into ongoing reading instruction. As part of her school's literacy strategy, students are encouraged to engage in regular independent reading, and she allows some students to read news articles as part of this in class. Students who do so react differently. As she noted:

So two of the boys that knew nothing about anything in terms of news, they now absolutely love the news. They tend to print things off for me that I don't particularly have time to read, but one of them is following the war [in Ukraine] very avidly. He's not got any – as far as I can tell – any European connections, but he's become fascinated by it and really upset at times... There's another boy who, who's really interested in the news, who's a really...bitter, angry boy, but he loves finding out stuff that he thinks I'll be interested in...and they both are allowed to read the news in our ten minutes of independent reading...and they're hooked.

What is striking about this example is the impact that integrating news has on Polly's students. While texts can be useful resources for reading instruction, they do much more than that. They can also spur

curiosity and acute emotional responses (Hoog & Verboon, 2020), and these are suggestive of a dialogue students are having with Polly and the voices of the text.

When talking about the selection of texts for students, Polly drew attention to the importance of culturally-sensitive sources. While in our focus group she expressed concern about coming off as “racist” by engaging with her students’ cultural backgrounds, in my interview with her she offered one successful example of such practice that was well-received by students. In response to a pre-service teacher’s observation, that the news reports students were studying in a junior secondary class as part of the news media unit were mainly from Western sources, she suggested Polly offer students English versions of newspapers from all over the world. Working with the pre-service teacher, Polly then provided students relevant weblinks. In response, she recalled her students’ instant excitement and engagement. In one case, her students of Lebanese background were drawn to a newspaper report about pistachio harvests and the plight of farmers, which quickly gave rise to a “conversation about how good pistachio nuts are in Lebanon.” As Polly put it, these newspapers struck a chord with students – not necessarily because of the reports in them – but because they “triggered their pride...cultural pride.” This example shows how news reports touch on student identities, and that selecting such texts can stimulate student interest, and this interest can give rise to discussion about the contents and issues contained within reports.

In different ways, then, teachers bring news into the classroom. Given a reported tendency among Australians to avoid news (Fisher et al., 2023), this work is significant. It sends a message to young people that what is happening around them matters. Engaging students with media texts about current issues also serves as a way to open up a dialogic space for teachers and students to talk about the issues the texts relate to and how they are being positioned in relation to them. While there is scope in the curriculum for this in both junior and senior levels to directly address issues of media representation, my

study shows that teachers are taking other opportunities to incorporate news and connecting it with reading instruction and the broader aims of the curriculum.

5.2.2 *Playing the demigod*

This is the second theme under the broad title of ‘opening a space for dialogue.’ All participants elaborated on a range of ways they generate dialogue about news and current issues with their students. Many of these dialogues involved a great deal of planning, but they also include responsive moves that teachers make in the moment. As a result, I break the discussion of the theme into two parts: ‘Planning’ and ‘Roles and moves’.

Planning. Most prominently, in my interviews with David and Dimble, they described how they plan in ways that make such discussions a feature of their classroom routine. David explained how he runs what he terms “news conferences” with his small group of EAL students on Fridays. His approach resembles an approach to teaching current events used by other teachers (Morrison, 2015). For David, the activity is highly structured but still student-centred. He described a typical lesson:

We spend 40 minutes – half the lesson...having what we call like a news conference. So it's like a meeting – we run it like a meeting with an agenda and somebody takes minutes...and each week they bring in a news story that's interested them.... They sort of introduce the story, they tell us sort of all of the details about it: the who, what, when, why, how, and then we have a discussion about it. On the surface of this example, David’s approach seems like a stimulating way to improve reading and communication skills. However, the strategy is also brimming with dialogic potential vis-à-vis pedagogy for teaching news texts and issues. Notably, in handing over text selection to students, David is facilitating a dialogue with different voices in the media and oneself (Hermans, 1996) about which issues matter to students. Moreover, in presenting their own choice of text to the class, students are able to disclose something about their interests, their priorities and identities – and this way, they are able to insert themselves into the world (Arendt, 2018).

Similar to David, Dimble described how he conducts what he terms a “Socratic circle” about news texts with his English Language class. Dimble explained that the purpose of the discussions is to bridge two parts of the curriculum: the study of linguistic terms and metalanguage and more philosophical discussions about the changing nature of language in Australia. As he described it, this involves students in two circles: an inner circle, discussing the languages features of a news text, while those in an outer circle surrounding them provide feedback on the discussion. He explained:

The kids...sitting on the couch-kind-of-[inner]-circle are the talkers, and the ones on the outside are sort of heightened above them with little pages of...feedback sheets in front of them are the listeners. And then, basically, they discuss for ten minutes without any intervention from me, and then, we go round on the outer circle [and] fill [in] note sheets that are focused on the actual discussion and how it went... who spoke, and how confident people seemed.

Like David, the discussion in these settings appears to be a teaching routine, and where students will know what is expected of them. More importantly, though, in overlaying the study of news texts with structured dialogue, Dimble is able to both reinforce key concepts and analytical skills as well as help student see and feel what it is like to be a citizen actively engaging in dialogue. In this way, the space he creates encapsulates a range of dialogic strands. The structured nature of the dialogue provides a scaffold for thinking in a way that strongly resembles a sociocultural view of patterning thought through talk, while at the same time Dimble is clearly interested in engaging students in the forms of everyday political dialogues that are the lifeblood of democratic life.

Locations for these conversations varied. While most seemed to occur in conventional classroom setups, both Dimble and Francesca reported moving to alternative settings with couches and roundtables. Organising physical space can be seen as a tool for fostering dialogue in English classrooms (Juzwik et al., 2013). In describing the venue for Friday Socratic Circles, Dimble indicated that “we go to, you know, the best room we have in the school that’s kind of...a café counter in a horse shoe

shape...[with] couches on the inside.” Francesca demonstrated a very similar practice, and offered a reason for relocating for important discussions. She explained that “modulating the physical space” creates an atmosphere in which students “don't feel like [it] is like a lesson, like a classroom... it's a different type of discussion.” The power of these strategies is that they not only help students relax and feel comfortable offering up their own views and interpretations, they also in many ways replicate real world domestic settings among friends or family in which political talk sometimes takes place (Conover & Miller, 2018), such as over a meal or in response to an online comment. The relocating and associated re-orientation of bodies no doubt changes the nature of the relationships between students – encouraging an openness to the other in a way that a conventional classroom setup may not.

Another element of planning that emerged was the importance of preparing students for conversations about highly-charged issues. This was the case for Francesca, who remarked that “I try and build up in with lower stakes ah conversations first...like: should the canteen ban like single use plastics?...so that it removes that sort of deep personal emotional charge, but they kind of learn that...it's okay to present an alternative view.” Unlike David and Dimble, Francesca pays careful attention to the selection of topics that will be discussed and not just how and when, and she uses less controversial discussions as a way to reduce the potential emotional ‘toll’ of such conversations. Garrett (2020) finds that teachers “acknowledge, centre, dismiss and accommodate” (p. 351) the “physical economy” of emotions in political discussions. In this case, Francesca appears to both acknowledge the role of emotions while also militating against them in order to provide students with a space to engage in “safe dialogue[s].”

Yet even within highly planned or scaffolded discussions about news and issues, the teachers told me that they also want them (the discussions) to appear authentic to students. This is evident in the labels they ascribed to routine conversations. As noted above, David for example, offered the label ‘news conference,’ to his ‘routine’ Friday conversations about a news report. Similarly, in my interview with

Dimble, he explained that he “lovingly refer[s]” to his Friday conversations as “our awkward conversations.” Not only are teachers like Dimble aware of the importance of labels, it seems, they are also cognisant of the messy dynamics of classroom conversation. Dimble noted that exchanges between students during his Friday conversations are somewhat “ham fisted” and replete with “forced transitions...you know, just quite literally: ‘what do you think?’” Similarly, Wallace, who strives to create a dialogic classroom, remarked that at the time of the interview in the wake of COVID lockdowns, to be ‘dialogic’ in his classroom simply meant “share your ideas.” Biesta (2006) notes the potential of apparently plain questions such as ‘What do you think?’ to bring others into a conversation and into the world in an Arendtian sense (Arendt, 2018). So then, while Wallace and Dimble might hold reservations about the complexity of classroom talk between students, they are nonetheless facilitating a profound encounter – albeit under the guise of what they suggest is an basic back and forth exchange.

Building on teachers’ desire for authenticity, while participants stressed the importance of planning, they also acknowledged that discussions can occur spontaneously. Francesca remarked that in her class, both teachers and students would initiate conversations and that the ratio of teacher-initiated to student-initiated conversations would depend on the age of students. She recalled that:

Sometimes I piggyback off a conversation that I'm hearing, but...I suppose those full discussions have often been instigated by...me more so than by the students – especially in the younger year levels. In the older year levels, they'll definitely say like, “Oh my God, Ms Francesca, have you heard the Wade versus Roe call?” And I’ll say, “Do you want to talk about anything in particular?”

The fact that students are so willing to approach Francesca about different issues is testament to the open and safe classroom environment she strives to develop and maintain.

Roles and moves. Teachers reported a range of ‘moves’ or strategies to generate dialogue and sustain engagement and scaffold critical thinking. As discussed in the literature review (see 2.2.3) there is a large body of literature on different ‘moves’ that teachers can make to encourage dialogue and

critical thinking through talk (Cui & Teo, 2021; Nystrand, 1997; Vetter et al., 2020). In their review of the literature on dialogic teaching, Cui and Teo (2021) distil five main moves: elicitation (i.e., inviting contributions); extension (i.e., asking for explanation or elaboration); connection (i.e., link participants and their ideas); challenge (i.e., question to prompt clarity and deep thinking); and critique (i.e., evaluate claims and arguments made). What my study reveals is that these teacher moves cannot be removed from the teachers understanding of their role as English teachers. Specifically, different types of moves they reported making appeared to mirror in many ways the sorts of roles that they saw themselves performing, which could in turn be by implication linked back to their beliefs, values and priorities as educators. In this way, aspects of classroom dialogue they reported generating were an enactment of their professional identities.

David's history in multicultural media as well as his passion for promoting curiosity and critical thinking are reflected in the sorts of roles and moves he adopts in classroom dialogue. Given his background in media, it is telling that he calls his Friday chats 'new conferences.' David reported using questioning to explicitly model to students how to critically evaluate texts. As he remarked, "One of my roles as the facilitator of these discussions is to model a critical and questioning reading of news sources. I do this through the kinds of questions I pose." In his written response as a follow up to his interview with me, David explained that the sorts of questions he poses to students about news sources include: What makes you say that? Where did you get this information from? How do you know that's a reliable source? More broadly, David observed that in his Friday news conferences he facilitates discussions through a range of moves that elicit, extend, challenge and connect students and their contributions. These include offering provocations, follow-ups, alternative and controversial or opposing perspectives, or reiterating a point, recasting and simplifying a comment and posing a comment or question to different students.

Sanja, who as discussed in the previous chapter comes from an interpreting background, values expanding students' view of experience. In my interview with her, she noted the importance of making connections with other media texts and personal experiences of herself and her students. This was in order to help students build background knowledge and expand students' thinking beyond their own (often narrow) views and interpretations about local and world affairs. In one instance, she recalled that she worked to help her EAL students understand Grace Tame's refusal to smile for a photo with then Prime Minister, Scott Morrison⁴. In order to do this, she drew on the example of her own son who, as a senior secondary student, refused to be included in a photo opportunity with the same Prime Minister over deep political differences. In her words, making this connection and explaining his reasons helped "make it real" for her students, and allowed them to access the text and broader debate about Grace Tame's behaviour. While the connection she made in the case was not to someone in the class, by invoking the example of her son, she was in a way expanding the dialogic space of her classroom to bring his lived experience to bear on their discussions.

Similarly, Francesca sees her role as a teacher as helping students "interface with the world." In this way, she reported using a range of questions that push students toward a more holistic engagement with media reports. As such, the examples she provided illustrated elicitation. For example, she noted that when students have questions about a story they had encountered in the media, she poses the following questions to elicit their thinking and emotional responses: Have you seen this? How do you feel about it? What are some views that you have? What are some questions that we have? As will be discussed further in the next chapter, instead of playing the role of transmitter of knowledge, Francesca's purpose was to model how to approach challenging issues. As she remarked, "I try and

⁴ Grace Tame was awarded Australian of the Year in 2021 for her work advocating for victims of sexual assault in institutional settings. Subsequent to the award, Tame became critical of Morrison's handling of allegations of sexual assault in Parliament House, which emerged soon after she received the award from Morrison. She expressed her displeasure by refusing to smile in widely distributed photos with the Prime Minister at an official morning tea in February 2022.

model...that I'm not the expert – I'm modelling critical thinking and learning as well, so that other students can then join in." Crucially, these questions tease out what students have heard as well as what they know, think and feel. This approach aligns with her own view of her role as a teacher as helping students "interface with the world" and how they relate to the issues playing out in the media.

Likewise, Dimble sees his role as an activist (Sachs, 2003). As noted in the previous chapter, in my interview with him, he acknowledged that he wants students to have as many democratic experiences as they can before leaving school. His focus on students and their experiences seemed to translate into setting up and then only strategically intervening in discussions. Indeed, Dimble reported that his students have labelled him "god," while he referred to his role in Friday discussions as that of "a very informed student who would kind of interject at points and sort of explain things." Similar to David, this seems to paint the teacher's role as offering strategic clarifications or pieces of knowledge at key moments with the effect of extending and expanding the quality of dialogue. Unlike David, though, he appears to want to play a much more peripheral role and this aligns with his stated outcome of wanting to give students their own experiences of democracy.

In sum, the participating teachers often commented on the work involved in planning and generating dialogue in their classrooms. Clearly, for the teachers in this study, generating dialogue involved multifaceted work. This involved deploying a range of dialogic tools (Juzwik et al., 2013) – from creating meaningful activities in which students could share their views about texts and issues in the media through to modulating space as well as planning ahead for dialogue about contentious issues. In addition to this, the teachers spoke about taking on a range of roles and appearing to make different moves to initiate and sustain dialogue. These moves they emphasised could, by implication, be connected to how they see their role as English teachers and aspects of their professional identities. This suggests strongly that there is no one way or route to promoting dialogue in contemporary English classrooms, at least for the participating teachers in my study.

5.3 Building a dialogic classroom

In the previous section, I looked at the practical dimensions of making current issues in the media a topic of dialogue in the English classroom, as well the initiation and development of these verbal exchanges. For the teachers in my study, such dialogues are not random or isolated, but rather part of the fibre of the teaching and learning. Their significance is derived from the support of other practices that foster an environment where teachers and students are encouraged to value and communicate their ideas with each other. Following from this, the themes in this second section explore these broader underpinnings that sustain and give meaning to discussions about current issues and events. The first theme (5.3.1 “It’s fragile but we’ve got it”) explores the sorts of relationships and expectations the participating teachers establish in the classroom, and the second theme (5.3.2 “Building from the bottom up”) describes the myriad ways they build a communicative classroom where students are empowered to voice their opinions.

5.3.1 “It’s fragile but we’ve got it”

The title for this section is drawn from comments by Polly, and it summarises the ways the participating teachers spoke about the careful building of classroom conditions that enable open and critical discussions about current issues to occur. In terms of practices, this can be thought of as the sorts of ‘relatings’ (Kemmis et al., 2014) that teachers foster. All of the participants seemed to share the ambition of creating a space in which students and teachers value each other and are able to engage in respectful exchange of ideas. However, there were important differences in terms of how they visualised this space and what it would look and feel like to them. In doing so, they stressed the importance of building relationships of trust with their students and acknowledged that this takes time and work. In addition, they emphasised the importance of being clear about and enforcing classroom expectations and norms in relation conversations.

Teachers in my study shared the view that classrooms should be places where different voices are heard and valued. David and Sanja were explicit about the need to appreciate every student and what they bring to the class. In my interview with David, he remarked that “the personalities in the class really shape the classroom – and I allow that to happen...because when you’re in a small group...there’s a real opportunity to let everybody really shine.” In allowing students to be themselves, he facilitates what he considered a “comfortable atmosphere where people feel really confident...that they can sort of take [a] risk that nobody’s going to sort of make fun of them.” In actively encouraging students to be themselves, David is fostering a dialogic space that allows for the sort of Arendtian (Arendt, 2018) insertion of self into the world in all of its uniqueness. As a result of allowing students to ‘be themselves,’ it would seem to follow that the dialogue in David’s classroom is also unique to his context – a product of the idiosyncrasies, identities, values and opinions of the students and teacher. This has important implications for the discussion of challenging issues – as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

The need for students to feel comfortable in the classroom was echoed by Sanja, who argued for the importance of creating a “learning environment where students are...relaxed” and “free to share their views”, and where students are not criticized but where the teacher finds “value in something that they are saying.” Implicit in this is an acknowledgement of the value of a diversity of opinions. As David put it, in among his students there is an “acceptance that there are different perspectives, and I...definitely feel like I’m there to facilitate students expressing their perspectives and not being afraid to...express what they think about things.” This openness to different views mirrors David’s practice of celebrating the different personalities in his class. In doing so, both his and Sanja’s approach to classroom dialogue appears to embody a quasi-Bakhtinian appreciation for a dialogic space in which the teacher’s role is to encourage and value a multiplicity of voices.

While sharing a core appreciation for giving voice to all, Francesca emphasised the importance of creating a safe space, and she was the only one to use the language of ‘safety’ to describe the classroom

environment she aspires to create. At the outset of my interview with her, she remarked that it was her role to help students engage in “safe or guided dialogue”, as opposed to what might occur as an “inflammatory or knee-jerk reaction” outside class time. Moreover, she foregrounded the language of safety in formulating the aims of the unit about news media literacy she developed for year nine students – many of whom start their enrolment at her school at that point. She observed that her “number one priority was to figure out – okay: how do you facilitate discussions that are safe? How do you facilitate discussions that are inclusive?” Likewise, when reflecting on the vulnerability that can accompany participation in classroom discussions about issues and events that are relevant to students, she remarked that “you want to...make sure that this is a safe, constructive discussion before you start launching into everything that you think or how it affects you.”

Francesca’s insistence on safety is worth pondering further. The notion of ‘safety’ has a certain commonplace parlance, and is often treated as a key feature of productive discussions about controversial issues (Saetra, 2021). Yet, the notion of safety has also come to be challenged in recent times. As alluded to in the literature review, in 2010 Leonardo and Porter (2010) were questioning the safety around conversations of race – arguing that the regulation of talk (i.e., attempting to remove discomfort, conflict or controversy) about race benefits white students. In that study, they urge educators to see the classroom as a space of risk – not in terms of hostility but growth. More than a decade later, it seems for some researchers risk may well be the “antidote to safety” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 1953). Similarly, Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that safety is often conflated with comfort – potentially thwarting the discomfort that can accompany change towards social justice. These things being the case, it would be disingenuous to describe the conversations in Francesca’s class as risk-free. And yet, her insistence that the classroom not only be safe but also “inclusive” and “constructive” and not “knee-jerk” pushes back on the idea that safe spaces privilege dominant groups and are unable

to stimulate growth and change. Rather, Francesca seems to be holding out for the possibility that respect and criticality can be held in fruitful tension.

In spite of divergences around conceptualising what the ideal classroom environment should look and feel like, all participants agreed on the importance of developing classroom relationships. In particular, they acknowledged that this relationship building involves emotional work. In my interview with David, he reflected on the importance of building relationships with students. He remarked that,

I've known most of these students for some years, and... because I'm the leader of the EAL team, I've sort of gotten to know their students quite well over the years. So, I think that relationship is important to be able to have those discussions and...so yeah...I feel like we have developed a trusted relationship.

This desire to know students aligns with David's professional vision of the "special" and "pastoral" relationship that he sees EAL teachers having, and this relational work bears fruit when it comes to managing difficult classroom conversations about issues and events in the news.

Likewise, Francesca's and Polly's experiences suggest that while building trust is essential, it takes work and patience. In my interview with Francesca, she noted that creating a safe space "takes work." It was similar for Polly. She described how she builds trust through a range of different activities in the English classrooms – acknowledging that "it's hard – with [a] new class, it's hard to do discussions straight off the bat. You have to develop through the back door your relationship." She indicated how she does so through the one-to-one conversations she has with students about their personal writing (i.e., memoirs) which she schedules for early in the school year. Despite these attempts, she acknowledged that building relationships is not instant or easy. As she recalled in one particular example:

There was a boy...[who] said to me, in front of the whole class..."Why are you telling me to read? What do you know? You don't know me"...He was very negative about anything I put up on the

board. And I just stopped, and I said, “I'm really hurt by what you're saying to me, I know – and I can see that you really don't trust me, and I hope that you will come to trust me. I know it's not going to happen overnight.”

Examples such as this help to explain the relational and emotional work that goes into the construction of a dialogic space. It is tempting to argue with Buber (2013) that a fully dialogic relationship of equals between teachers and students is impossible, and hence that any attempts to build an abiding trust between teachers and students is arduous unnecessary. However, this seems at odds with Polly's experience. Rather, it would seem that her example points to the ways in which affective work is inherently part of the complicated and inevitable intersubjective work that dialogue calls people to.

Perhaps for these reasons, participants also commented on the need to be explicit with students about behavioural standards they wanted to foster in the classroom, especially those that promoted positive relationships. This is especially important in Australia given the reported prevalence of behaviour management issues in Australian schools (OECD, 2023). Wallace emphasised the value of teaching students to “agree to disagree gracefully.” For their parts, Francesca and Polly emphasised respect and kindness respectively. For Francesca, these expectations are all aimed at generating respect in the classroom. She noted that “we have our rules up on the – or agreed expectations – up on the wall...respect being fundamental. You can't have a conversation if a student feels as though they might be shut down for what they're about to share, even if it's in an exploratory sense.” Similarly, as noted in the previous chapter, Polly insists on a classroom culture of kindness. Despite her students' scepticism at first, she observed that “I make it really clear that...that's what I care about.” While kindness is not necessarily the same thing as respect, both are broadly involved in attempting to generate a culture of tolerance for others in an English classroom. While tolerance might seem a ‘low bar,’ it would seem an important first step in addressing social and political polarisation.

Finally, participants noted the imperative to actively establish and re-establish norms around communication in class. On the one hand, this involves a respectful classroom dynamic throughout a year and across different areas of study and topics. Francesca insisted on this, noting the need to “establish that dynamic with...each class every year anew, and sometimes...over and over again. You can have a great class dynamic to learn how to... talk about a poem, but it's a very different class dynamic, and it's a very different level of trust to have a talk about...Euridice Dixon's death⁵” (see Percy, 2019). Likewise, both Polly and Francesca actively call out behaviour that falls short of their classroom expectations. When explaining how she promotes kindness in her classroom, Polly remarked that “I do stop any nasty comments all the time. I'll say, no, that's absolutely not acceptable.” Likewise, Francesca recalled putting an end to an “extremely counterproductive” classroom discussion about gender pay gap in sport because, in her opinion, a group of boys in her class were “presenting ideas and not wanting to hear [the other side].” These comments and experiences draw attention to the fact that for teachers, facilitating a dialogic space in classrooms involves actively promoting meaningful interactions and exchanges with others as well as calling out behaviours that impede the sort of deep listening which enables people to think carefully about their own worldview, beliefs and values.

5.3.2 Building from the bottom up

In sections 5.2 and 5.3, I explored how teachers in my study integrated discussions about news and issues into their teaching, and how they created a classroom environment that was conducive to dialogue between students. Yet such discussions are neither as perfect nor isolated from the other work that teachers do across the rest of subject English. In this section, I want to describe the various activities and strategies that teachers use across the subject that foster ways of relating, thinking and communicating (Kemmis et al., 2014) that serve to both create and empower students to participate in

⁵ A young female comedian, Euridice Dixon was raped and murdered in Melbourne, Australia, while returning from an event on the evening of June 13th 2018. The incident raised further concerns about violence against women in Australia.

the dialogic space of the classroom. Specifically, teachers in my study use a range of strategies and activities to develop students' communication skills; they emphasise the importance of responding to others, and they scaffold ways of thinking critically about a range of texts and situations.

The participating teachers were keenly aware and invested in the importance of building students' communication skills. This point speaks to the very heart of the vision of dialogue as an "interplay of voices" as Lefstein and Snell (2013) would have it. In interviews, teachers shared a range of strategies for facilitating speaking and listening. Francesca described using "embodied pedagogy" – an approach to teaching that some scholars (Nguyen & Larson, 2015) trace back to Dewey's (1916) insistence on the importance of action to the construction of knowledge. Nguyen and Larson (2015) define this as "learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction" (p. 332). Francesca shared an example of embodied pedagogy that allows all of her students to share their views on particular issues. She recalled:

I use...embodied pedagogy strategies. Things like...lining students up in two lines facing each other, and then everybody will talk to the person opposite them about a particular issue in the news at the moment....and then they'll rotate down the line and have the opportunity to sort of explain it again, so that they can reformulate their ideas. And then the person on the other side of the line will have listened to two or three peers go past them and then they'll have the opportunity to sort of synthesize and, and talk back.

This activity is a common variation of the previous discussion in the format of concentric circles – a form of 'speed dating' or what Gaunt and Stott (2018) call the "onion" activity (p. 58). Crucially, Francesca pointed to the reality that many students do not wish to participate in whole class discussion – the implication of this being that a potential 'interplay of voices' is complicated by social constraints. In this case, a dialogue can be realised through the facilitation of student to student activities such as the one

Francesca offered, which help give voice to students who “don't want to be...the only one in the classroom to respond to the teacher with their hands up.”

The point about not participating in whole class discussions also points the complexity of interpreting silence (Bao, 2014). It suggests that silence in class is not necessarily indicative of an absence of meaningful engagement, just as mere talk is not always necessarily evidence of dialogue (Segal, Pollak, et al., 2017). Indeed, both Polly and Francesca described different ways to include students who are less forthcoming in open whole class conversation. To do so, both teachers use writing as a platform for speaking. Polly described one activity that she termed “silent conversations,” which involves students responding in writing to provocative statements on A2 pieces of paper around the room about different contemporary issues. Students are able to respond to other students’ in writing on the A2 card, but they are not able to talk. At the end, the teacher collects the responses, and calls for verbal responses from a sample of anonymous comments. In another example, Polly shared how she often asks students to do what she terms a ‘quick write’ or ‘reader response’ – which involves writing five sentences or questions in response to a quote. In Polly’s view, armed with their short written response, a shy or less forthcoming student can “tell you what they said on their post-it-note.”

Similarly, Francesca described how she uses a common teaching strategy of think-pair-share. She adds writing to this three-step process, to become “think-ink-pair-share.” Like Polly’s quick write or reader response, this general teaching strategy allows for students to formulate their view before sharing it and hence allows or encourages more students to participate. These strategies foster dialogue in that they encourage a multiplicity of voices (Bakhtin, 1984) and set learning in a social context (Vygotskiĭ, 1987). By working in pairs, they scaffold learning through interaction, and facilitate an encounter between two voices – the “minimum for life” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 252). By using writing, these practices also suggest that dialogue can be visible through a multimodal lens – where talk is not the only mode through which people interact dialogically with each other (Edwards-Groves & Davidson, 2023).

Yet developing a dialogic classroom is not only about communication – it is also about the sorts of thinking that are emphasised. To that end, teachers in my study demonstrated various practices that helped develop their students’ critical thinking about texts across subject English. Notably, when studying a literary text with students, Sanja reported that she challenges students’ negative judgements about characters based on a misalignment of lifestyles choices. She does this by probing the merits of different lifestyle choices and values (e.g., sexual partners before marriage, single-parenthood etc.) – all the while inviting the students to understand how others might live their lives. Importantly, in such discussions, she models an openness to her students. While she admits that she often has “a clear idea in my head, what I want [from] them,” she approaches her students with an “offer for them to think,” and the willingness “to hear what they say.” On the surface then, the dialogue has a Vygotskian (Vygotskiĭ, 1987) quality in the sense that Sanja starts out from the position that she wants to bring her students to a particular way of thinking that she judges they do not possess. While there is an overarching attempt at this, Sanja does build into her approach potential for dialogue. In other words, in the process of convergence, she also presents opportunities for divergence.

Finally, the English teachers in this study also seemed to embed listening and responsiveness to others in their practice in small but significant ways. From the point of view of students, David invites students to bring news texts that interest them to class, a strategy that allows his students to respond to what they are seeing in the media, as a weekly practice, and cumulatively to respond to texts and voices over the course of a term or year. Moreover, as part of the Socratic Circle, Dimble’s students are encouraged to listen carefully to their peers in order to provide detailed feedback about the quality of their talk. Turning to teacher responsiveness, as noted previously in this chapter, Francesca observed that many discussions about current issues in her classroom come as a response to a question from a student to their teacher. In determining how much (or what) teachers should say in response to students, Polly observed the importance of teacher silence. She remarked that “one of the things I’ve

got to still get better at is not keeping on responding myself.” She observed that after inviting students to respond to an idea or comment, “I’ll...Zip it” (i.e., keep silent), which can be “massive for teachers.” While it is impossible to measure the degree of reciprocity in each of the classrooms described by participants in their interviews, the reported strategies and experiences show teachers valuing the voices of others – not for the purpose of obtaining the right answer, but as practices promoting ways of being and relating to others that promote generative dialogue.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described and analysed the participating teachers’ practices in relation to how they facilitate discussions about current issues in the media in English classrooms. In particular, across two sections, I have explored four themes from my reflexive data analysis: ‘Bringing in news’; ‘Playing the demigod’; ‘It’s fragile but we’ve got it’; and ‘Working from the bottom up.’ The analysis related to these themes has shown how teachers integrate news into their classrooms through specific media units and broader outcomes across the discipline – including the Australian Curriculum English, VCE units and the IB programs. The chapter has shown how a lot of these discussions occur as part of structured learning activities as well as being prompted by teacher and student questions. Moreover, teachers in my study spoke about actively working to create respectful classroom environments in which their students feel comfortable to ask questions and share their views. Finally, the teachers pointed to broader practices across subject English that can help to build a communicative and dialogic classroom environment – conditions that sustain the sorts of talk about current affairs that this thesis is investigating.

This gives rise to a series of findings in this chapter as they relate to teaching practices. First, when it comes to establishing dialogic ways of *relating* (Kemmis et al., 2014), teachers in my study clearly value the importance of building relationships in their classrooms. Their important work resonates with the strand of dialogue as a way of relating to others and promoting openness and respect toward others

today. They want their students to show kindness to each other and feel that their views and experiences are valued, and they aim to model this and point to shared expectations that promote respectful behaviour to others. This becomes significant in the next chapter where I discuss teacher and student reluctance to participate in conversations about topics that might be seen as controversial or sensitive. At this point, however, it is sufficient to point out that my findings indicate that building relationships of trust takes time, effort and emotional work. This in turn suggests that a dialogic space is developed over time, and that any one example of a dialogic exchange between students is a contingent reflection of classroom dynamics at any one time. What the findings also point to is that the willingness to open up to others is shaped by familiarity with each other over time as well as active attempts of teachers to build up the relational fabric of the classroom.

While teachers in my study encourage strong classroom relationships (students with teacher, and students with students), it is also clear that they have different conceptions of what a space that fosters dialogue should look like. For Francesca, safety is important, while for others comfort and being able to be oneself are paramount. As alluded to, these are not mutually exclusive aims – both imply a valuing of the other that I have argued underpins a dialogic way of relating to others (Buber, 1937). Yet, there are important questions that still remained unresolved. If personalities shape the classroom, how does the teacher manage the various biases and prejudices that so often come with being human and belonging to different groups. Given their duty of care, are there any opinions that are off-limits? On the other hand, is there a point when the tension between criticality and respect collapses? And how do teachers respond if it does? These are questions with no easy answers, and as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, they point to broader tensions in society that English teachers and students are negotiating every day in their classrooms.

Moreover, one of the most important findings from this chapter has been to identify by implication a link between professional identity, the roles that teachers see themselves playing and the dialogic

moves (Cui & Teo, 2021; Nystrand, 1997; Vetter et al., 2020) they report making in class. Teachers do not just mobilise moves and strategies out of thin air. Rather, the moves they make reflect something about themselves and their professional identity, values and priorities as an English teacher. This has profound implications. On the one hand, it humanises the profession. Specifically, it shows that English teachers are not machines who mobilise a range of abstract albeit highly effective strategies in their teaching. Rather, the sorts of moves they make in class – whether it be challenging students, offering alternative views, making a personal connection or gauging how students feel about a particular issue or topic – are connected to the context of the teaching and the personal experiences and professional aims of the teacher.

When it comes to opening a dialogic space in English classrooms, it is clear that teachers play a pivotal role. These spaces do not magically appear. Rather, the findings from this chapter have highlighted the complex and ongoing pedagogical work associated with generating opportunities for productive classroom dialogue about current issues. The findings indicate that this expertly work is multidimensional (Lefstein & Snell, 2013), involving curriculum-planning, critical resource-gathering, integration of texts, planning, developing communication skills, relationship-building, modelling, explaining, scaffolding, monitoring, modulating space, as well as setting up routines and expectations. These efforts take time, are complicated and require teachers to respond to their students and contextual variables such as working with their students' communicative proficiency, personal characteristics, cultural values, discursive practices and student identities. Given the active role of teachers, it may be more apt to describe their work in terms of 'constructing' a dialogic space.

When seen from the perspective of developing students as citizens, the acts described in the previous paragraph are also pedagogical acts as much as they are political acts. That is to say, drawing on the strand of dialogue from the methodology as civic engagement I proposed in the methodology chapter, every opportunity that a teacher plans and organises for students to look at a news report, to

have a conversation about an issue in class or develop their communication skills, is an invitation to participate in the social and political world inside as well as outside the English classroom. Yet the work that teachers perform to promote dialogue is not only multifaceted, it is a full of tensions and complications. Dialogue about current issues does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in 'real' classrooms in particular social and political contexts and with students and teachers who have diverging beliefs, values and identities. The thesis turns next to how English teachers manage these challenges.

Chapter 6 – Into the minefield: managing challenges

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I described the pedagogical strategies that my participants reported using to generate a classroom environment in which rich dialogue about current issues in the media could take place. I outlined how they integrated such conversations into their teaching, as well as how they managed classroom relationships and conditions to support rich dialogue. The findings drew attention to the active role that teachers play in opening a dialogic space in their classrooms. Teachers in my study actively integrated news stories and anchored their discussions to curriculum outcomes. Moreover, through relationship building as well as communicating and acting on expectations about respect, they reported being able to build a safe environment for their students to engage in dialogue about contemporary issues. In addition to this, the work they perform across the English subjects promoted dialogic classrooms through a variety of pedagogical approaches – from building oral communication skills, through to valuing responsiveness and helping students to think critically about how their own values shape the way they interpret texts.

In this chapter, my aim is to explore how teachers address the challenges associated with promoting dialogue in their classrooms about current issues in the media. It needs to be recognised that classroom dialogue occurs in an instructional context. As illustrated in the first chapter, teachers find themselves in the crosshairs of intense culture wars, with increasing public scrutiny brought to bear on the texts and topics addressed in classrooms. They also receive mixed messages from politicians who assert that classrooms should be politically neutral spaces where the curriculum is taught – despite the same political leaders sharing a vision that schooling in Australia should help students become active and informed citizens (Education Council, 2019). In addition to this, in educational settings, teacher professionalism is increasingly framed as the effective delivery of de-contextualised content over and above any personal responsiveness (Brown et al., 2021) and education is shorn of civic relevance. This

means that responding to student questions about issues in the media might well be treated as superfluous, irresponsible or even unprofessional. Even an issue such as climate change, in particular communities, leads to backlash from parents and the school community – leader teachers to consider the topic too difficult to address (Payne, 2024).

With this in mind, where the previous chapter was about how teachers generate dialogue, this one deals with the challenges and complications associated with these efforts, and my purposes is to illustrate the tensions that teachers face and how they manage these. In order to make sense of the tensions that accompany classroom dialogue, this chapter again invokes the conceptual framing of generating talk about current issues as the promotion of a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2011; Wegerif & Major, 2019). In this space, teachers can encourage three strands of dialogue: (i) dialogue as a way of relating to others; (ii) dialogue as a way of thinking with others; and (iii) dialogue as civic engagement. In this way, they tap into the relational, epistemological and emancipatory potential of exchanges between teachers and students in ways that address the deterioration of public discourse outlined in chapter 1. Yet establishing a dialogic space is not straightforward nor an easy achievement. The English classroom can be a place for challenging discussions about complex texts and situations (Laughter et al., 2018). Discussions about global conflicts, public policies and protest movements reported in the news are no less challenging. Given that they touch on people's identities, associations, opinions and values, one might expect that a degree of tension is inevitable. More than any other section of this thesis, this chapter illustrates the complications associated with opening a dialogic space in a particular social and political context.

The chapter draws on data from interviews and the focus group, and is divided into two sections in accordance with the two themes developed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These themes describe the complications teachers face in creating a dialogic space about current issues, as well as how they manage them. Accordingly, the title of the first theme, 'Navigating the minefield'

(6.1) comes from a phrase used by Francesca in the focus group and aptly denotes the myriad of social, emotional and cultural challenges that many of the participants reported facing, particularly in contexts where what was discussed was of a sensitive or potentially contentious nature. The other theme, 'Give them a mask' (6.2) is drawn from Polly, and it refers to pedagogical strategies that English teachers employ to enable students to navigate contentious issues and their own identities.

6.2 Navigating the minefield

In many ways, the moves teachers make to generate dialogue that I analysed in the previous chapter belie the complexities of experiencing and participating in the conversations themselves. Navigating these complexities would appear to be akin to navigating a minefield – a term used by Polly. There are a myriad of such difficulties, and in describing the first theme, 'Navigating the minefield,' I break these tensions down in two ways. In the first part, teacher and student reluctance (6.2.1), I describe reluctance by students to participate in discussions about issues that might be seen as controversial or which do not directly impact the lives of students. Moreover, teachers themselves report fears about appearing racist or offending students by offering opinions that might impinge on student loyalties to their cultural identity. All of these factors related to initiating discussions are complicated further by external contingencies such as the impacts of COVID and the influence of social media. In the second part (6.2.2), 'Expanding and developing thinking,' I explore the complexities of generating rich and expansive thinking around issues and news texts within a dialogic space. These tensions may be connected to the need to build student background knowledge to contribute meaningfully to discussions as well as the need to address ingrained views about media that students bring to the interpretation of text. As I will show, these views are bound up with personal experience, family loyalty and cultural identity and so are not easily challenged.

6.2.1 Teacher and student reluctance

Participants in my study reported a degree of reluctance on part of students and teachers to participate in some classroom dialogue about particular current issues in the media. Reflecting the title for this section, I break down the reluctance in terms of students and teachers.

Student reluctance. In part, student hesitancy to participate in certain exchanges might be derived from students' self-conscious awareness of what Dimble termed 'taboo' topics. The idea of a taboo topic here is one which might be seen as controversial or avoided in everyday public life. It is worth noting that there is a common and possibly over-simplified view that many Australians do not like to talk about politically contentious topics (Evanson, 2016). Moreover, recent research (Fisher et al., 2023) suggests that Australians increasingly avoid news about particular topics, most notably: climate change, global conflicts, sport, entertainment news and social justice (e.g., related to race/inequality/gender/ sexual orientation). While this research is troubling in and of itself, as it suggests political disengagement from key social and political debates, it also points to a challenging cultural climate in which to promote classroom dialogue about current issues. In this context, the data indicates that students in some schools are hesitant to participate in dialogue about current issues. These reasons for this are varied and include awareness of the cultural climate of the school, a lack of topical knowledge, personal removal from or proximity to an issue, as well as a desire to show politeness.

The challenge of navigating the cultural climate of a school was reflected in the responses of teachers. Dimble remarked that some students at what he described as his "progressive", inner-suburban school, are well aware of the "invisible lines" that mark the "broad cultural norms" of the school and popular or dominant views in the surrounding area. As a result, they demonstrate a reluctance to talk about or take up positions on particular social and political issues. He remarked:

I've noticed ... that they're, they're much less confident talking about news because there's too many taboo topics – at least as a teacher in [the inner city area where the school is located] where they just

go like, well, we all know what the correct answer is to some questions...and so what you get is just like everyone takes it in turns to be like, yes, I think Australia Day is a juicy topic. And the next person will say, I agree. And then no one really takes a stand on anything.

In other cases, in Dimble's experience, some students have strong opinions and "dominate the discussion cos they've got the language, they've been in the forums." In doing so, they can leave other students "on the outer" feeling that "I can't enter into that." In many cases, as Dimble notes, the teacher ends up having to "manage awkwardness."

In reflecting on why many of his students were less forthcoming, he noted that while in his adolescence there were no 'taboo topics,' "there's certain things that are for, for this generation of kids, just...not spoken about and...no one seems to mind...that that's a thing." As previously indicated previously (Ratcliff, 2023), this may indicate changes in young people's sensitivity to issues of difference. On the other hand, it could also indicate what Neolle-Neumann (Matthes, 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1984) terms a 'spiral of silence', whereby people express opinions they perceive to be shared by the majority of others. Indeed, students are well aware of their ideological surroundings and with some exceptions (Wansink et al., 2023), they navigate this through seeking out like minds or just repressing or modifying their view to avoid ostracization (Journell, 2017).

These cultural factors impact how students forge opinions. Dimble offered an insight into this in the context of thinking about an upcoming VCE English Language lesson. One of the aims of VCE English language is for students to "explore how people use spoken and written English...to think and innovate, to construct identities, to build and interrogate attitudes and assumptions"(VCAA, 2014, p. 5). This requires engaging with all sorts of texts and voices in the English classroom. In this context, Dimble shared his intention to talk about changes to language used on government forms to refer to parents as birth givers (Karp, 2022). In the focus groups, he shared that "the students just sort of go like, yeah... I agree. And I'm like, there, there isn't really an agree side here you know, like it's not a yes no, it's like

shades of grey.” In other words, engaging with different voices in a school context that already values particular voices becomes “way too tricky” for some of Dimble’s students. In other cases, he noted that students are aware of the polarising views around them but are much more willing to take a middle of the road position. In his experience, students today seem to “have quite a high level...of awareness that things have gone a bit too far kind of toward progressive-ness and wokeness.” Instead of adopting the competing positions they encounter online, he noted that they are on the whole “less committed” and “relatively moderate” in comparison to previous students he has taught.

Aside from school culture, it is clear from the data that proximity to an issue also matters. In the focus group, Polly remarked that students who have a personal investment in an issue can “hit the ground running.” Conversely, Francesca reported that in her experience some of students may be reluctant to take up an issue because they do not have a particular personal or cultural connection to the issue or group that is being discussed. In these cases, she observed that:

When issues in the news don't affect them, or speak to groups that they're not a part of...I think many students aren't sure about...what voice they can have or what opinions they should or could have...and they don't want to be like in inverted commas, “cancelled”, by asking questions about particular things.

The language of ‘cancelling’ here is striking. While it is unclear whether Francesca’s students share the same feeling, it is clearly a significant term for her – she mentions it in both the focus group and interview along with a reference to political correctness.⁶

In chapter 1, ‘cancel culture’ was explained at length. To recap, Ng defines cancel culture as both a practice and a discourse (2022). On the side of practices, Ng (2022) argues that cancelling practices

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘politically correct’ as “appropriate to the prevailing political or social circumstances” and also as “conforming to a body of liberal or radical opinion, esp. on social matters, usually characterized by the advocacy of approved causes or views, and often by the rejection of language, behaviour, etc., considered discriminatory or offensive.”

involve removing support for someone or what Norris (2023) calls the “cultural ostracism of targets (something or someone) accused of offensive words or deeds” (p. 148). One widely broadcast example of this collective attempt to ostracise a prominent individual is the documented threats of violence and burning of copies of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series after she was accused of making transphobic comments (BBC, 2023; Nolan, 2020). In addition to this, in a context of declining support for conservative values outlined previously in the chapter one, the discourse of ‘cancel culture’ is also bound up with a populist strain of conservative politics. In Australia, Kevin Donnelly (2024) has argued that cancel culture can be associated with “destroying statues, re-writing history, re-naming Coon cheese, promoting gender fluidity in schools...attacking free speech and seeking to intimidate and silence those who don’t subscribe to Woke orthodoxy.” In bundling these separate actions together, Donnelly exemplifies Ng’s (2022) argument that the term ‘cancel culture’ is increasingly a signifier of conservative political identity.

There is no easy way to parse the interpretations of cancel culture and their consequences for schools. As Norris (2023) perceptively notes, defining cancel culture has become so partisan that some scholars avoid it altogether. More instructively perhaps is her observation that arguments about cancel culture are sign of “deepening ideological and value cleavages dividing progressive liberals and social conservatives” (p. 169). As discussed previously, clearly Western societies are experiencing a backlash against shifting values (Inglehart & Norris, 2019) and battle lines are clearly drawn around discussions of issues such as race, sexuality and gender. Teachers and students are inevitably caught up in these debates. Gordon warns (2022) that a culture of suppressing or excluding ideas and opinions – no matter how well intended – may lead to students and teachers to become narrow-minded, unaccepting of differences and disconcertingly accepting of a fabricated consensus. Whether this is an exaggeration or not, debates about who can speak and what can be said in public play out in the media regularly and surely weigh on the minds of citizens – included among them, secondary English teachers. Without

wanting to overstate the case, this does seem to hold true for Francesca. Her appropriation of the language of 'cancelling' shows that she is aware of cancel culture. This is significant to the extent that interpretations of students' behaviour and attitudes shape teaching practices.

Questions of 'cancelling' aside, while some students might shy away from participation because they are removed from an issue, some of the data suggests that others might too because the issue directly impacts them. Francesca notes that for marginalised students there might well be concerns about where a particular conversation about race might lead. In conjunction with the example provided above, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, Francesca noted that some of her students were "sceptical about...where's this conversation going to go?" As she observed, for students "from backgrounds other than Anglo-Europe...it's an investment to sort of put your experiences on the line or put your perspective in front of your peers." Questions of culture, voice and power in the classroom point to the notion of 'cultural safety' – which in Victoria is the 'obligation' that schools ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel valued and respected (*Schools - culturally safe environments guidance*, 2023). Lautensach and Lautensach (2011) argue that a lack of cultural safety is the primary driver behind Indigenous' students' silence, passivity or problematic behaviour in schools. While it is impossible from my data to derive any such findings because the cultural identities of students were rarely discussed, it would appear that culture plays a role in at least how Francesca makes sense of the sorts of hesitations around participation in classroom conversations.

In addition to the cultural climate and proximity to an issue, some students demonstrate a desire to show respect for marginalised groups. However, this too has its challenges. For example, Francesca recalled a particularly memorable lesson where she discussed the Black Lives Matter movement with a Year 11 Literature class in the wake of protests at the time. In my interview with me, she remembered:

I sort of put a black square up on the projector as they walked into the classroom, and they were all like, 'oh, blah, blah, blah' and started talking about it...so we do have, you know, some students of

colour in that class, but predominantly, you know, students of Anglo or European heritage there. And there was a real sense of...oh, I really want to have a chat, I really want to ask questions, but I'm so afraid that I might ask the wrong thing...that I might say the wrong thing. There was a real anxiety around, really, genuinely, and from a place of goodness wanting to be politically correct, but also wanting information.

This is a striking observation that can be read as a demonstration of teachers observing students learning to navigate the I-Thou encounter in a context of contemporary culture wars and increased cultural diversity. Specifically, Francesca sets up an implicit conflict between wanting “to have a chat” and “wanting to be politically correct.” The language in this example is reminiscent of the conservative framing of public debate (i.e., free speech vs cancel culture/political correctness). Crucially, this suggests that in navigating classroom encounters, teachers and students seem to be also navigating broader political discourses around the nature and limits of public speech as framed within both progressive and conservative political discourse.

All in all, the challenges students face complicate the view of a dialogic space in which there is an unrestrained interplay of ideas (Lefstein & Snell, 2013). Rather, it would appear that familiarity with the topic as well as the context and culture of the classroom, school and broader society all appear to mediate participation in dialogue about current issues.

Teacher reluctance. It is not only students who are reported to experience reluctance when it comes to classroom dialogue about issues in the media. Turning to teacher apprehensiveness, David, Sanja and Polly all expressed concerns about wanting to avoid offending students. Polly’s anxiety about offending students reflects students’ concern about ‘saying the wrong thing.’ Like Sanja, she works in a school with significant cultural diversity. In this context, she reflected that she would like to engage more with issues of cultural and national identity in class, but she expressed the fear that “I’m going to sound racist” and she wished that “I could just talk about it with like with more confidence.” More broadly, she

reflected on this lack of confidence and tied it to a broader “awkwardness about talking about race” and her observation that “we don't talk about identity very well, very openly anyway.” In expressing her concern about lacking “the language,” she worries that “I'm going to...offend somebody.” Polly is not alone in her aversion to talk about politically charged issues such as race (Hess, 2004; Laughter et al., 2018; Thomas, 2015). She is clearly reluctant to hurt or offend students – particularly, as noted in the last chapter, when she insists so much on kindness in the classroom.

Polly's desire to avoid causing offence is echoed by both David and Sanja. David noted that for many EAL students, perceived criticisms of their country of origin in discussions about reports in the news at an international level could be taken personally. In reflecting on managing discussions of fake news in his class, he observed that,

You've got to be very careful to avoid offending people, and because I think that for many of the students...their national pride and their... sense of cultural identity is very much tied up with their...the nation that they come from...which is very linked up to any criticism – and well any perceived criticism of their country would be taken personally.

This position is reinforced by Sanja who foregrounded the role of values, remarking that, “I'm very careful at what I'm really saying so that I'm not offending someone's values. But I'm still probing in a way.” These observations underscore the challenges and opportunities with cross-cultural dimensions associated with classroom dialogue. If, as Buber (2013)underscores the idea that “all actual life is encounter” (p. 42) – a meeting of I and You – then dialogic approaches to intercultural communication would see differences as generative rather than as an obstacle to further dialogue (Xu, 2013). What the observations by David and Sanja suggest is that such encounters are intrinsically fraught with sensitivities – particularly when national, religious and cultural identities are central to the discussion.

Exacerbating these issues for teachers is the reality of dealing with a number of contingencies that impact students' willingness to participate in classroom discussions. One of these is the

hyperconnectivity of contemporary life. In other words, in a digital world, what happens in classrooms is not easily contained within the four walls of the classroom (Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016). This is not necessarily a new phenomenon, but one that is all the more important to consider in a digital world of social media. Polly remarked on this in the focus group in response to Francesca's observation about the anxiety some students feel in expressing opinions. She noted that,

We know that they're doing a lot of discussion as always on social media, and I think there's that fear that you're going to be talked about in all directions, and that sort of as a real suffocating...presence in the classroom...It sort of holds people back a lot.

There is something crudely dialogic about this insight – in a Bakhtinian sense – an utterance in one space gives rise to an utterance in another space. Yet, the realities of online bullying among adolescents in Australia (Jadambaa et al., 2019) pervert this dialogic reality, and they dramatically increase the stakes in terms of the personal investment involved in expressing a view, posing a question or challenging a point in class – and they add yet another complication to classroom dialogue.

In addition to this, there is the impact of student wellbeing and social development on the possibility and quality of classroom interaction. Some teachers expressed concerns about the socialisation of young people in terms of their behavioural self-regulation and their ability to communicate in complex ways with others, and they tied these to restrictions around face to face schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria (Fray et al., 2023). Wallace noted at the time of our interview that lockdowns had reduced his work to create a dialogic classroom to the simple imperative, “share your ideas.” At a more extreme end, Polly observed that despite planning engaging lessons, teachers at her school lamented that “a lot of kids ... are really struggling to sit down in their seats and focus on anything.” This is reflected in research that suggests there is a particular issue with behaviour management in Australian schools (Leif, 2023). While Polly seemed to share the causal link between poorly developed social skills and the social isolation of life in lockdowns, she also noted deeper concerns around student well-being

and the fact that the number of her students reporting physical abuse at home had also increased. The suggestion from this is that such home environments inhibit students' willingness to trust and engage with others, and this reality makes opening a dialogic space all the more challenging and rewarding.

6.2.2 Expanding and developing students' thinking

Another set of complexities that teachers in my study encountered as part of their "Navigating the minefield," related to expanding and developing student thinking. In other words, while the first section (6.2.1) describing the challenge of teachers and student reluctance relates to accessing and metaphorically entering a dialogic space, in this section I describe difficulties teachers reported experiencing within such spaces. These issues had a lot to do with the interpretations of texts. In particular, teachers reported the difficulty associated with varying degrees of student background knowledge about current issues. They also observed the challenges in asking students to revisit ingrained political views that students hold. These sorts of conversations seemed to occur directly around the content and nature of news media reports explored in class and in contexts of rich international and cultural diversity – particularly for Sanja, Polly and David.

One of the challenges raised by two participants was the lack of student background knowledge. Polly and Sanja were most vocal about this point. This is curious, given they work at the same secondary school, which might suggest familiar classroom experiences or thinking about students. Polly observed that students have differing degrees of knowledge of what is happening in the news, and even when they have some knowledge, it is usually minimal. In the context of a part of the focus group in which participants were discussing student connections to issues, she recalled one particular example:

I was thinking about the Sri Lankan crisis a few weeks ago⁷, and I've got a few boys in my year twelve class, and I was trying to make parallels with...*The Giver*, and it was a bit of an outside the box conversation. But um they didn't really have much of a background knowledge about it, and I couldn't go anywhere unless I ran the conversation...and I don't want to do that. So sometimes...it surprises me how little older kids have their ear to the ground.

Given the cultural make-up of the school, it is possible that boys she refers to have a cultural attachment to Sri Lanka. Whether she is alluding to this or just the fact that it was such a significant story in the news at the time, she clearly attempts to make meaningful connection between what is happening in the news and the literary texts studied in class. However, her mistaken assumption that students are informed about current events overseas leads to some exasperation on her part.

Sanja echoed this concern about background knowledge, but she also points to broader cultural and linguistic challenges with unpacking texts. Like Polly, she acknowledged that to some degree, the judgement that students are “not avid readers of news,” is reflected in their lack of contextual knowledge about particular events and issues discussed in class. This may not necessarily be indicative of a lack of general interest in current events and issues. Reports from teachers in Australia (Fadel & Preston, 2017) suggest that students who have a language background other than English seem more interested in international current events in class than their peers, who do not have such active cultural attachments. Yet, despite this interest level, there is a rather clear distinction between the sorts of discussions that are reported to occur between different groups of EAL students at different schools in my study. In David's case, it is implied that students already have a bank of background knowledge, and so dialogues seem to be more political and philosophical, whereas for Sanja, establishing a body of knowledge is one of her main responsibilities. This division may speak instead to differences in 'cultural

⁷ Around the time of the interview in the middle of 2022, Sri Lanka was experiencing political upheaval due to economic mismanagement. Mass protests led to the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign and flee the country.

capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) and the sorts of discursive activities that happen at home (Heath, 1982) – questions that are inevitably bound up with questions of socioeconomic status – reflected in the types of schools in which both teachers work (i.e., affluent independent vs low SES public school).

In light of her awareness of the linguistic needs of her students in accessing texts, Sanja feels strongly about the need to unpack the cultural nuances associated with persuasive texts. In responding to my interview question, she recalled discussing a particular text about an infamous photo of Grace Tame (Australian of the Year in 2021) and the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Kelly & Cassidy, 2022). She noted that the particular article was “highly cynical, it was highly ironic” and as result, some of her students “just couldn’t get it – they just said that the author was angry with Grace Tame. Actually, she was not...She was not at all.” She further added that, “you could see that they [students]...were not able to identify this irony in the text – for some students because of the lack of attention...others they could not understand the nuances of the language.” As a result, she concluded that, “in an EAL classroom, it’s very important that you understand all the cultural nuances...of understanding the text.” This challenge speaks to the ‘extra’ work that EAL teachers in particular need to do to provide contextual and linguistic knowledge to students who are new to Australia before any meaningful and expansive discussion about a news text is possible.

Sanja further noted the challenges her students have when they apply their own personal experiences to interpreting texts. In my interview with her, she recalled a particular example of classroom discussion about attempts to raise the age of criminal responsibility in Australia. At the time of the interview, this age was ten – a low age which some organisations have argued disproportionately impacts Indigenous Australians (International, 2021). She observed how students in her class interpreted the issue in terms of racism. As she put it:

Very often they will just go straight away into the um most flashy ideas of you know – is Australian society racist? They would [say], ‘is this miss because they are racist?’ So I think um there are particular issues that are more important to them.... So they would tend to generalize heavily... and that was for them the easiest link straight away.

In making sense of this example, it is important to understand that Sanja teaches at a public secondary school located in a low socioeconomic area of south east Melbourne that draws in culturally diverse students, many of whom are newly arrived in Australia. This helps make sense of the ways that students in the example seem to bring their experiences of marginalisation to bear on their interpretation of other instances of potential discrimination. For Sanja, though, this sort of thinking is a generalisation – an oversimplification of what is a more complex issue borne of students’ lack of contextual and background knowledge. There is a tension then between the ways that teachers and students read the world based on their experiences and priorities – for the students the issue seems to be reducible to racism, while for the teacher there is a more nuanced position and a level of maturity or wisdom for students to attain through challenging them about their own interpretations.

In other cases, students also bring their own identities to bear on the interpretations they make of discussions of international conflicts. In the context of the war in Ukraine, Sanja recalled a level of what she considered to be “jealousy” in the way many of her students reacted to the West’s participation in the conflict – a grievance they seemed to tie to questions of religion. In a lengthy but poignant turn in our interview, she observed that:

One of my students would ask ah, ‘Miss why does not world pay attention to...the Muslim victims when there's a war in a Muslim country?’ And...yeah I understand what they are saying, but on the other hand there is this...really not good grasp of what's going on. And they are just trying to...relate somehow to the to their own points of view or to their own lives...And to my colleague it happened that one of the students said, ‘So Miss what does it mean that if they are blue eyed and that they are

blond that the whole world is now supporting them'...not really appreciating the fact that... it is war, and not really appreciating the fact that people are being killed, and not really appreciating the fact that the world international communities did really help in Afghanistan. So it looked like all this jealousy because they are who they are.

In both of these cases, students seem to be seeing themselves in the reports about social and political issues. For them, discussions of conflict are not about abstract matters of geopolitics; rather, they seem to touch on deep, personal and collective grievances against the West that emerge from their experiences of war in countries such as Afghanistan. Yet it is worth noting Sanja's own experiences from in her country of birth in the Balkan region where she experienced firsthand the ravages of ethnic conflict herself. Hence, while she demonstrates understanding, she laments the ways in which some personal grievances can cloud empathy with victims of ongoing conflict – irrespective of their identity.

In a similar way to Sanja's challenge of dealing with the content of particular news reports, David relayed experiencing difficulties with defining media bias. In particular, he goes to great lengths to point out the complexities of 'fake news' in the context of a classroom of international students. He recalled that,

There's a lot of complexity around this idea of sort of fake news, and...assessing the credibility of sources when it comes to working with EAL students. And I've sort of struggled with that a bit this year, because....a lot of my students have very ingrained views about that.

As evidence of this, David recalled a discussion with one of his students that occurred in the context of a Friday discussion about the reporting of the war in Ukraine and China's position in relation to the conflict. He remembered:

I had a student who was...saying that...American media is really biased against China...And he just said, well look, 'The *New York Times* is a really biased, a biased media organization'... and he was saying – and I said, 'Oh really, who told you that?' Then he was like, 'My father.' And, so yeah, it was

just really interesting insight to me in terms of where students are getting their information from, and of course like you know, like their father is obviously a trusted source for them, and...there are just such different perspectives...depending on...your own experiences, and who's told you this, and what your family thinks, and what news sources you're reading, and what country you come from, and what maybe you've been brought up with.

This is a striking observation from David. It reinforces the view that critical thinking about information cannot be divorced from motivated reasoning (i.e., accepting evidence that aligns with one's own worldview) and the role that social and political identities play in interpretations of texts (Baer, 2019). From a pedagogical point of view, he seems to be wrestling with both the need to teach about media bias and the realities of what that might look like when different identities and loyalties are implicated in the teaching. The dilemma he feels is not easily resolvable as it suggests that the deconstruction of the politics of text (Luke, 2012) and raising of critical consciousnesses (Freire, 1972) is impossible without a simultaneous challenging of the identities of those doing the deconstruction and consciousness raising.

6.3 Give them a mask

In attempting to manage the twin challenges of reluctance to participate in dialogue and expand student interpretations and opinions, teachers offered a range of strategies and approaches under the theme 'Give students a mask.' Some of these have already been covered in the previous chapter and the ones mentioned here need to be seen in concert with them – notably the importance of building relationships, a safe environment and trust between teachers and students. In addition to these, participants drew attention to the importance of 'giving students a mask' – a theatrical metaphor used by Polly in the focus group which primarily refers to the strategies identified to manage the challenges of reluctance and ingrained views identified in the previous section (6.3). While the metaphor is used to describe strategies for students, it is clear that teachers also deploy a range of pedagogical strategies to

give themselves a mask to counter complications they face. In this section, I break down the strategies in terms of those used to help students (6.3.1) and those for teachers (6.3.2).

6.3.1 *Masks for students*

In the first instance, the idea of giving students a mask was offered as a pedagogical strategy to manage dialogue about sensitive issues and topics. Polly used the term in the focus group and she used it in the context of discussions about literature such as a character ‘hot seat.’ This activity is where a particular student sits in the ‘hot seat,’ assumes the identity of a character from a text the class is studying, and they are subsequently asked questions about their character. Broadly speaking, the strategy refers to a range of ways teachers provide students to separate themselves from the views they express. As Francesca expressed, the purpose of the strategy is to allow students to discuss different viewpoints without those opinions “being traced back to them.” Reflecting on the personal release that comes with this anonymity, Polly notes that giving students a mask “definitely frees things up.” In both cases, the cover of another identity allows students to engage liberally with different views and opinions without incurring any perceived personal cost or loss of face.

Participants offered a range of concrete ways for using the strategy of giving students a mask in class. In the focus group, Francesca offered a glimpse into what this would look like in her classroom. She imagined a situation where students would be given a card identifying a particular stakeholder and in respective groups they would need to ponder, if “this is our position that we’re this stakeholder, what would we say about this issue?” Not only does this sort of role play encourage a diversity of opinions in the moment, but it can also help students negotiate their own personal and political identities. David emphasised this point when he recalled that after doing some role play around the concepts of nationalism and internationalism, he had noticed that many of his Chinese students who “identify themselves as nationalists” and who are “often unquestioning of Chinese news sources and

perspectives” had come to appreciate the value of global citizenship and international cooperation through responding to general reflection questions about how their views had shifted.

While there seems to be affinity for theatre in English classrooms, other participants highlighted the importance of less dramatic ways of generating multiple perspectives in the classroom. These sorts of strategies involved thinking aloud about hypothetical situations – what someone might think. To anchor this imagination in the everyday, Dimble suggested that students might consider what someone outside of the students’ suburb or a family member might think of an issue. In a matter-of-fact way, he offered the following insight into his own practice in the focus group:

I just say...if we weren’t having this conversation sitting in [the suburb where the school is located] at the moment, what might people say?... What might, you know, someone in your family think? What would your mum say? What would your dad say?... At least that kid can say hey, I said the polite thing that was expected of me...and I didn’t push myself under the bus.

This comment responds to Dimble’s observation of the cultural politics of schools and the degree to which his students seemed aware of what views were or were not acceptable in their local area. In this pedagogical strategy, the use of suburbs and other family members are vehicles to explore different views of the world. This in turn contributes to Dimble’s attempt to open a dialogic space in that his students are able to engage with a diversity of views that they might otherwise not engage with. Doing so grounds an otherwise abstract discussion of arguments in the here and now, and it helps students appreciate the complex nature of any given political landscape. While creative role-based activities are widely practiced in English classrooms (Brady, 2018; Bryer, 2024; Shapiro & Leopold, 2012), it seems that they take on added significance in light of student and teacher fears about giving offense and the need to promote perspective-taking.

In addition, another way participants were able to address student hesitancy was through the use of humour and personal stories. In recalling a lesson that contained a discussion about the issue of sexual

assaults in Parliament house, Francesca recalled starting the lesson with a funny social media clip about a line taken from then Prime Minister Julia Gillard's address to parliament about misogyny and sexism ("Transcript of Julia Gillard's speech," 2012). She remembered:

I started it with...a viral Tik Tok of people doing their makeup and miming to that, like remix dance track. So like I put that on everyone's like, oh yeah, I know this...[as if to students] okay, what else do you know about where it came from? And then I'd sort of like wiggled into – and now let's discuss.

Similarly, Polly remarked that she uses personal anecdotes and stories as a way to help facilitate student participation. She noted that, "I'll often start with a story an anecdote, and I definitely embellish things that have happened in my life. Um and it does sometimes create a willingness amongst the kids." In both cases, teachers displayed creativity in finding ways to bridge the gap between them and their students, and thereby fostered students' willingness to share about their own perspectives. Seen from a dialogic point of view, the use of humour and story involves a degree of vulnerability by teachers. Entering into dialogue involves risk (Burbules, 1993). By teachers showing that they are entering a space where they are putting themselves on the line, students are perhaps more willing to enter the dialogic space too.

Beyond these strategies and techniques, some teachers also felt it was important to explain key concepts and terms that help students think more critically about where they stand in relation to the political landscape. In a follow-up written response to me about identity work he sees happening in his classroom in relation to conversations about news, David recalled that he and his students had been unpacking concepts such as internationalism and global citizenship, and that in his view, doing so "gives students important language to be able to discuss and interrogate these concepts at a deeper level." In some cases, this work is painstakingly methodical. In order to unpack the irony of a particular text with a group of EAL students, Sanja remembered whole class discussions that consisted in analysing a text word by word. As she put it, "I started to look at every word, then they...stop – then they started looking

at oh what's happening here.” It is surely not a coincidence that both David and Sanja teach EAL, and their awareness of the linguistic demands on their students demonstrates a student-centred approach.

For her part, Sanja noted that in contextualising media texts for EAL students, it is important to explain audiences and political terms such as a left, right, conservative and progressive. She recalled in one case that one of her traditional Islamic students moved between political positions in class. The particular student, who resisted progressive political ideals about sexuality, found herself “becoming more progressive” when Sanja explained that in Australia “very conservative people would be very much against refugees and Muslims.” In this case, teaching about the political landscape and opinion climate of the nation prompted the student to rethink the association between her religious identity and her political beliefs.

6.3.2 *Masks for teachers*

Of course, these example of giving students a mask can also be seen as a way for teachers to protect themselves from scrutiny too. As explained at the start of this chapter, teachers are under immense public scrutiny. The example at the start of this chapter of the public criticism of teachers wanting to discuss the conflict in Gaza or other contentious issues is evidence of the fraught political climate of teachers’ work. In this way, using a hypothetical example or giving students roles can occur in lieu of engaging in an open conversation with students. Some teachers in my study admitted to suppressing their personal opinion – such as David’s comment that “I’m never sort of expressing my own personal opinions about things” but rather framing “things in a way by sort of saying, you know, well some people might say this.” It is impossible to say with certainty whether David’s approach is the result of broader discourses around teaching which aim to de-politicise the profession, but it is difficult to ignore the broader context. In an environment where teachers are told they cannot express their own view, teachers can channel their own views through a non-descript Socratic voice. This can be interpreted as a way of ‘scholasticizing’ what might otherwise seem overtly political discussions (Pollak et al., 2018).

Framed in terms of learning, English teachers can thereby avoid accusations of making ‘political statements’ (Eddie, 2023; Grace & Eddie, 2023).

To address teacher anxieties about saying the wrong thing, Francesca emphasised the importance of positionality. Rather than assuming that the teacher knows everything or has the right argument, Francesca offered the idea of democratising expertise. She noted that in a “critical discussion the whatever hierarchy that you might think exists in a classroom between teacher and student has to flatten.” In such situations, teachers can seek to model the steps of critical thinking while including experiences. She provides an example of this, recalling the classroom discussion about the Black Lives Matter movement shared previously in this chapter. In response to students’ desire to talk about the use of black squares but hesitation to do so, she recalled saying to students:

“Heaven knows, like, take one look at me – I am not the expert on this issue – we are all going to learn about it together. What questions do we have? Let's brainstorm them all. How could we find information about it? What can we do to help?”

This approach is thoroughly dialogic in a Freirean sense (Freire, 1972): it positions teachers and students as both learners and teachers in the same space. While it is not clear whether it entirely alleviates Polly’s fears about being perceived as a racist, it suggests that some of these fears might be bound up with the power relations within the classroom, and the solution seems to lie in dispelling the artificial construction of teachers and students as respectively perennial experts and novices.

In addition to positionality, the importance of the language was prominent in several responses which were offered as ways to both develop student thinking and alleviate teachers’ fear about causing offence. While David’s dilemma about the complex nature of fake news suggests that the roots of disagreements over media bias run so deep that they might be beyond the transformative potential of classroom dialogue, nonetheless he suggests care in how he frames his contributions to classroom discussions. In response to my asking about how he avoids causing offence, David remarked that he

makes a deliberate attempt to never express his own personal opinion, but rather, as he put it, he tries to “open up a platform” and “frame things in a way by sort of saying...well some people might say this, or some people might say that.” Nonetheless, this technique echoes the strategy explained previously about giving students a mask. In this case, David sets up a dummy public (i.e., ‘some people’) and he uses this as a vehicle for exploring different views. While David’s suppression of his own views from discussion is at odds with the fact that students often do want to hear their teachers’ opinion about political issues (Yamashita, 2006), his reluctance to disclose his own views makes sense in a time of increasing policing of schools.

Likewise, for Sanja, success in cross-cultural encounters involves verbally acknowledging a difference of values and opinions about the world. She noted that when confronted with ingrained political views, she questions students and asks them to explain or substantiate their views. In other cases, where the discussions veer into themes such as a romance and sexual relationships (e.g., sexual intercourse before marriage) that might be perceived to offend the religious values of her students, she she insisted on striking a balance between probing and acknowledging differences. She remarked that, “I’m still probing in a way, I’m still not stopping because I’m satisfying [students’] views...but I feel that because they come from, you know, different settings, that I need to be more forthcoming and understanding of what their views are.” In this way, Sanja subtly makes way for a dialogic ‘in-between’ (Buber, 2013) and in so doing, she offers students a space to negotiate their own views and identities.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the two themes, ‘Navigating a minefield’ and ‘Giving students a mask’ in my analysis of data from interviews and a focus group with the participating English teachers. These themes highlight complications that the teachers face in discussing current issues in the media with students and the strategies they use for dealing with them. Such challenges include student and teacher hesitation about engaging in conversations – especially about sensitive or highly charged topics and

issues such as those related to race, global conflict or gender identity. These challenges to initiating and sustaining dialogue are compounded by the pervasive influence of social media and the realities of working with young people who for various reasons are not well versed in what might be considered conventional forms of classroom interaction or have the appropriate background knowledge. In response, in addition to whatever students might do to address the problem, teachers report facilitating opportunities for role play or hypotheticals in order to allow students to engage with a variety of views without those opinions being tied back to them. They also emphasise the importance of positionality and building background knowledge and language in order to help students develop complex thinking about particular topics or issues in the news.

From the analysis, it is possible to make a number of broader observations about the challenges of initiating and sustaining a dialogic space with a topical focus on news and current issues. The first is to acknowledge the view that challenges associated with discussions of current issues are shaped by social and cultural forces and media discourses about education external to the classroom. This is to historicise classroom talk in ways that have been taken up in several studies of classroom discussions of race (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013; Thomas, 2015) and politics (Pollak et al., 2018). In the cases explored in this study, teachers and students struggle with locating dialogic practices away from the social and cultural developments in the broader community. Moreover, in an era of intensifying culture wars and attempts to divorce the work of teaching with work for social change, it seems that some issues are too fraught to be spoken about openly in the English classroom, and this combined with fears about fallout on social media, can stifle students' willingness to ask questions and contribute to discussion. Crucially, these influences are external to the classroom and yet seem to be present in the classroom – impacting the nature and dynamics of classroom interactions – at least around sensitive and controversial issues.

Alongside this point, the findings suggest that the participating teachers construct dialogic spaces in ways that are responsive these contemporary challenges. Specifically, it seems that teachers in this

study respond to fears about the personal implications of saying the wrong thing by creating classroom environments that are safe, and low-risk to students and themselves as teachers. Notably, the findings highlight the importance of the motif of ‘giving a mask’ through which both students and teachers can express and think critically about a range of views without losing face in the sight of their peers and the broader community. Moreover, it seems to be the case that when students feel that teachers are willing to put themselves ‘on the line’ through use of humour and personal anecdotes, then they are also more forthcoming in sharing what they think. As noted previously, while these strategies may not be new or unique to secondary English classrooms, they do seem to have particular resonance and value in the current social context in developing media literacy and the ability to dialogue with others. It is through these critical discussions about media that students can learn articulate their own opinions, challenge others and revisit their own views about the world (LeCompte et al., 2017).

In addition to this, there is a sense that the challenges that teachers face and the way they resolve them with their professional identities. David’s conundrum about how to define and teach media bias could be seen to arise from the value he places on curiosity – in the sense that he is open to what students think and he recognises that issues are not easily resolvable. Likewise, the way that Francesca deals with difficult topics in class is to assume a positionality of working alongside students as an equal partner, and this speaks to her own preferred way of being approached in conversation. Finally, Sanja too challenges students to think beyond their own experience and this reflects the value she places on knowing the world and the maturity that comes with this. As noted in the previous chapter, too, these different approaches speak to the ways that each teacher in each case brings – unknowingly or not – their own professional identity to bear on their practice in relation addressing the challenges they face. In other words, a teacher’s beliefs and values seem to play a mediating role in relation to how they report managing the challenges associated with facilitating dialogue about sensitive issues.

More generally, the findings point to the messiness of classroom discussions about contemporary issues in the media. To rework a line attributed to Barnes (1976), in my study it seems that learning does not seem to seamlessly 'float on a sea of talk,' so much as it seems to be tossed and thrown about by tumultuous waves and currents. This is clear by glancing over key words and phrases from the body of the chapter. These include: self-consciousness, taboo topics, cancelling, not taking a stand, personal implication, awkwardness, fear, race, language, student-wellbeing, cross-cultural communication, social media, background knowledge, ingrained views, mask, offence, vulnerability, positionality and power. The terms point to the social, emotional and cultural work involved in creating a dialogic space. While these are framed as challenges, one could well argue that they are part of the dialogic encounter (Buber, 2002a, 2013) for English teachers in current times – part of what it means for dialogue to be a way of thinking with others, relating to others and engaging in civic action. That is to say, these difficulties can be reframed in such a way as to see the messiness as the evidence of dialogue, rather than a set of problems to be avoided in order for dialogue to take place (i.e., discussions as minefields).

Yet, for all the solutions there is a sense that there are some things that run so deep they are beyond the scope of the classroom. There are no straightforward answers to concerns about student-wellbeing and the impacts of COVID. Moreover, notably, David's observation about the cultural and personal nature of discussions of international media bias looms large (i.e. Chinese students disputing the reliability of an American news source). In this case, a purely cognitive view of critical thinking seems inadequate to the social nature of establishing what people believe and why (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In doing so, David's point problematises the extent to which pedagogical responses can be impactful – at least any technicist responses that fail to account for the fundamental connection between learning and a students' social identity in English classrooms (Norton, 2016; Wilson, 2021; Yandell, 2013). Overall, while teachers in this study clearly exercised their professional agency in ways they felt best to meet the challenges they encountered, the complexities they encountered did not begin in the classroom, nor

were they easily resolvable. What then, do all of these findings mean? What do they point to? These questions are the subject of the discussion chapter to which this thesis now turns.

PART C

Chapter 7 – Discussion

It seems clear that in the context of global pandemic, social and environmental crises, it is time to rethink the ways in which secondary English contributes to citizen formation, and the ways we understand, speak, read and write about ourselves in the world. (Farrell et al., (2022, p. 317)

7.1 Introduction

In many ways, this project responds to calls from Farrell et al. (2022) and others (Barton et al., 2024; Riddle, 2022a) to rethink the role that English teaching can play in the face of contemporary challenges to democracy. Dialogic approaches to teaching and learning prepare students with the skills to navigate contemporary challenges (Teo, 2019). One of those challenges today is the increasingly fractious and polarised state of public discourse about current social and political issues (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021). This project has argued that English teachers can play a role in promoting dialogue about current issues in the media by opening space for dialogue and facilitating dialogic ways of thinking, relating and engaging civically with other about such issues. However, while these conversations are happening in classrooms in Australia (Barton et al., 2024; Peterson, 2020), what they look like not been well-documented or explored in great detail in the context of English classrooms. The project has sought to address this area through an analysis of reports of practice. In doing so, it has highlighted the vital civic work that English teachers perform.

In this chapter, I draw on the discussion from previous chapters to synthesize key overall findings from the project which illustrate the democratic work that English teachers do. In what follows, I identify and describe five key overall findings from this project and in the conclusion, I outline their significance for English teachers and English teaching today. As will be clear in the discussion that follows, some of the findings reaffirm existing literature related to aspects of educational dialogue and

teacher professionalism, while others provide new insights on the uniqueness of teachers' dialogic practices as well as the challenges of promoting dialogue in English classrooms in Australia today.

Ultimately, there are five overarching findings of the study, which encompass and cut across the range of findings identified in Chapters 4 to 6. These overarching findings are:

1. English teachers who promote dialogue about current issues have a democratically empowering vision of English teaching that is responsive to the needs of students.
2. A dialogic space in which teachers and students can engage with each other about current issues in the media is developed over time and in different ways.
3. Classroom dialogue looks different across settings and with different teachers.
4. Teachers and their students can be hesitant to participate in classroom dialogue about social and political issues, and teachers manage this through a metaphorical mask.
5. English teachers navigate a range of professional tensions and dilemmas when it comes to engaging in dialogue about current issues.

In the rest of this chapter, I explain these overarching findings one at a time, teasing out a number of associated insights.

7.2 Overarching finding 1

- ***Teachers who promote dialogue about current issues have a democratically empowering vision of English teaching that is responsive to the needs of students.***

The English and EAL teachers I interviewed for this study showed they are all driven by a socially and democratically empowering vision of English teaching. Their identities reflect this broader vision, and they position their work accordingly. This is not to suggest that other teachers cannot also have powerful discussions with their students. Rather, the data simply suggests that those teachers who *are* engaging in dialogue with their students about current issues in the media tend to have a more expansive vision for the subject.

Teachers in the study see themselves and their work as English teachers as serving a range of purposes. Teachers like Dimble actively and explicitly aim to foster democratic citizenship through their teaching; they make an explicit connection between citizenship and literacy (Farrell et al., 2022; Mirra et al., 2018; Spanke, 2021). David, Sanja, Polly and Francesca in different ways argue that English classrooms are places to build communication and social skills, curiosity, critical thinking, world knowledge and media literacy. While there are no significant differences between English and EAL teachers on this point, David did stress the pastoral role that EAL teachers provide in helping their students integrate into a new society. Taken together, the broad range of purposes reflects the unique multidisciplinary quality of subject English (Bomford, 2019; Green, 2008) as well as the aspirations of the rhetoric of official curriculum rationales (ACARA, 2021b; Education Council, 2019). They also reflect the emancipatory vision of the subject shared by other English teachers in Australia (Barton et al., 2024).

Participants also care deeply about their students. This view is shared by many English teachers in Australia today (Barton et al., 2024; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020). Of course, to some degree, any teaching can be framed in terms of care; neoliberalism subverts norms of care to construe helping students achieve on standardised tests as sufficient demonstration of concern (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2020). Yet, in many ways, such an approach puts the curriculum at the centre of the classroom and not the student. Rather, the sort of care evident in the Findings (Chapters 4-6) can be found in the participating teachers' responsiveness to their students' immediate needs and interests: from designing units that address students' under-developed news literacy through to integrating every day and culturally-relevant texts students can connect with, to responding to students' questions in class about events in the media. In all of these ways, the teachers embody Kostogriz and Doecke's (2013) call for framing teacher professionalism around an ethic of responsiveness to students and an attachment to their needs.

Driven by a socially empowered vision of English teaching and a concern for students, participants are seen in the Findings chapters to hold different positions in relation to the curriculum. On the one hand, some of the teachers connect their work around news and issues to the demands of the curriculum. This is demonstrated in David's and Dimble's structured approach to discussing news texts, as well as Francesca's and Polly's teaching of news media literacy units – all tied to different senior and junior curriculum outcomes respectively. In this way, some, like Francesca see no direct or obvious conflict between promoting dialogue about current issues and what she perceived the curriculum is asking of her, which is perhaps a reflection of her school valuing collaboration. In many respects, the example of Francesca and others reflect Riddle's assertion that at least in broad strokes, the English curriculum in Australia is already set up to enable critical talk and thinking around texts (Riddle, 2022a).

Despite this, some teachers do have strong reservations about senior VCE curriculum and the general culture of teaching that accompanies the standardisation of practice which limits the scope for classroom dialogue. David is highly critical of the narrow focus on the analysis of language features in VCE English as well as the relentless pace of senior English to the detriment of making time and space for dialogue about current issues in the media that students are interested in. In a similar vein, while Francesca appears to see the curriculum in a positive light, she does see problems with a culture that fixates on essay writing. David and Dimble are further critical of the disconnect between the curriculum and the world of students – evidenced in the use of what they characterise as 'unreal' exam texts, while Polly is bewildered by the pigeonholed nature of the modes for assessment. All of these issues such as lack of time, standardisation of texts and compartmentalisation of assessment reflect the managerialist drive of neoliberal reforms to standardise teacher practices (Loyden, 2015). These systematic factors can constrain teachers' capacity to carry out democratic work in their classrooms (Barton et al., 2024).

It is clear that participants in my study position their work in ways that are in a complicated relationship with neoliberal reforms of education. The way in which they position English teaching in

respect to social and civic empowerment demonstrates a vision of the profession beyond the neoliberal interests of education which serve the market (Connell, 2013). Likewise, they exercise a degree of agency over text selection and the organisation of activities that promote dialogue and meet curriculum objectives. The English teachers in my study show that they are not merely slavish deliverers of pre-packaged content (Brass, 2015; Brown et al., 2021; Loyden, 2015). In other words, while the scope of what these teachers teach may be mandated and scrutinised in a typical neoliberal sense, the interview transcripts make it clear that many teachers feel there is still space for them within the curriculum to integrate texts and pedagogical approaches that foster ways of thinking about issues in the media and the world that are tied to educational values beyond test performance.

In doing so, the participating teachers evidence a degree of pragmatism vis à vis official expectations. They exercise a degree of agency over how the curriculum is taught to promote democratic ways of thinking and relating to others (Riddle, 2022a). This pragmatic agency is not new. It aligns with O'Sullivan and Goodwyn's (2020) observation that secondary English teachers in Australia exercise what they term "adaptive agency" – that is to say, the mobilisation of their autonomy over parts of their practice. Of course, this is a far cry from calls for full autonomy over their practice that many have called for (Brown et al., 2021; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020), but it does imply that not all is lost for those secondary English teachers who see a bigger picture for the profession beyond compliance with professional standards, and maximising students' NAPLAN and VCE/IB results.

7.3 Overarching finding 2

- ***A dialogic space in which teachers and students can engage with each other about current issues in the media is constructed over time and in different ways.***

Key to English teachers promoting dialogue about current issues in the media is the opening and sustaining of a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2007, 2011, 2024) in their classrooms. The opening of a dialogic space is a way of critically engaging with the social and political polarisation in society that this project

addresses (Boyd & Sherry, 2024). As mentioned previously, the idea of English teachers creating a dialogic space and facilitating dialogue more broadly emerged while I was interpreting the data. Not all of the teachers mentioned the concept of dialogue explicitly. However, through careful reading of the transcripts, it became clear that this is what the teachers in this study were in effect doing in various ways. Specifically, the transcripts showed that this work involves a host of strategies that enable dialogue, such as those described in 5.1 and 5.2: building interpersonal relationships of trust; developing communication skills; developing teachers' and students' responsiveness to others; integrating meaningful texts that prompt discussion; and initiating and sustaining classroom dialogue that expands and challenges students' thinking about current issues in the media.

This project has highlighted what happens when English teachers intentionally make current issues in the media a topic of conversation. In ways that speak into the gap in understanding of how students encounter news texts in class (Corser et al., 2021; Nettlefold & Williams, 2018), the project has described ways teachers select and incorporate news and media texts that stimulate students' interest and speak to their daily lives. These approaches include David's allowing students to bring their own news reports to class as part of reading instruction; Francesca's presentation of a political tract or symbol of a protest movement; Dimble's use of TikTok reels as a hook at the start of a lesson and his selection of issues relevant to the local school area; and Polly's encouraging her students to read multicultural newspapers. Approaches such as these largely align with other research that shows accomplished English teachers often select texts that will engage students at some level (Clark et al., 2021; Morrison, 2015).

In tandem with this, the findings also point to the importance of building background knowledge. This aligns with literature suggesting that background knowledge is key to discussions about controversial issues (Saetra, 2021) and thinking with others about problems (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). The data from this project point to this being especially the case for EAL students who may need an

explicit orientation to a new media and political landscape as well as guidance in the use of language (i.e., irony) in opinion texts in order to better engage with the issues. However, the data also shows that building background knowledge is not simply for EAL students. Dimble related that in his experience, students who had an understanding of the language of debates related to gender identity were better able to articulate their opinions about the topic. This demonstrates that all students benefit from explicitly understanding the language and ideas around particular issues.

Beyond emphasising the importance of bringing news texts into explicit focus in English classrooms, the project has shown that key to helping students enter into dialogue with each other is the nurturing of communicative and dialogic capacities. Using their limited agency of pedagogical design (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020), teachers like Dimble attempted to develop their students' oracy through structured discussions – with time given to reflection about the discussion at the end. This resonates with Laughter et al.'s (2018) call for an explicit focus on listening and reflection on discussions in English classrooms as one small but significant way to address polarisation in society. The development of speaking skills is also heartening given Ollerhead's (2022) observation that Australian schools focus heavily upon reading and writing to the detriment of oral language communication skills.

However, the work is not just about skills – the research has highlighted the importance of developing relationships. The importance of building a positive and supportive classroom environment resonates with the literature from controversial issues and dialogic teaching (Burbules, 1993; Saetra, 2021; Wansink et al., 2023; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Teachers in this study insisted on the importance of building strong interpersonal relationships with their students. This varied between teachers and the organisation of their cohorts. For David working with a small group of EAL students, developing relationships between himself and his students seemed to happen over time through working with the same group. In other cases, teachers actively used strategies to build emotional bonds of trust and respect between themselves and students (Burbules, 1993). Polly illustrated this most

directly through her use of personal writing to get to know her students. In other cases, and in line with literature on educational dialogue (Alexander, 2020; Littleton & Mercer, 2013), teachers drew attention to classroom expectations such as repeated oral insistence on kindness for Polly, and written in rules for Francesca.

While there was broad consensus around the importance of building a positive classroom environment, there were some differences in the language used by the participating teachers to describe what relational work looks like in an English classroom. Polly insisted on kindness. Sanja and David favoured the notions of comfort with others and freedom to share one's own views. Francesca alone raised the importance of safety. It is difficult to say the extent to which these diverging views represent a genuine difference, but they do gesture toward a philosophical tension that exists in the literature in relation to the phenomenon of safe spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Callan, 2020; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). This tension centres around the degree to which the notion of safety is at odds with both freedom of expression and education for social justice. In other words, when safety is seen as a proxy for personal comfort, it could be seen to stymie vital but potentially uncomfortable encounters with difference and injustice.

To navigate this impasse, Callan (2020) suggests that classrooms should be safe in terms of assuring personal dignity for students but unsafe in terms of being intellectually challenging. That is to say, English teachers should foster an environment in which students have the right to speak and be treated as equals, while at the same time allowing for open and respectful disagreement. In striking a balance, Callan calls for "civil candor" and "interpretative charity" (p. 76). This suggests teachers might make a priority of showing students that they can express views in a polite and respectful manner and a willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt when interpreting what they say. These sorts of questions that teachers must confront underscore the complex, situational and relational nature of English teaching.

In addition to relationships, the findings also point to the role that curriculum and institutional settings play in enabling and constraining open conversations about the content of texts, and not just their structural or linguistic features. This is a point raised by David, who argued that the IB curriculum – with its focus on the exploration of broad themes – allows more flexibility for him to engage in open discussions about news and issues than does the state-based VCE curriculum – with its narrower focus on language and argument analysis of persuasive texts. Institutional culture clearly plays a role, too – while some participating teachers in particular schools felt that the news had no role in their curriculum, others did.

Strikingly, two of the teachers who appeared to feel the most at ease with open discussions about news were Francesca and David – both of whom work at elite private schools. This point challenges Fadel and Preston’s (2017) finding that teachers in schools in Australia which are driven by academic success find it harder to justify the value of addressing current issues in the media in their classes. From the examples of David and Francesca, it is clearly not the case that the discussion of current events has no place in elite private or high achieving schools or at least in *their* particular classrooms or school settings. This cannot simply be explained in terms of subject differences – with Fadel and Preston’s (2017) study looking into the experiences of social studies teachers – a subject area which has traditionally been the locus of studies relating to the integration of current events (Laughter et al., 2018). Looking at the transcripts of interviews with Francesca and David, it is reasonable to speculate that the progressive nature of the schools where they teach (as mentioned by both teachers) and the pedagogical culture of collaborative inquiry they foster may play a role in their willingness and capacity to engage in dialogue about current issues in the media.

All of these points draw attention to the extensive work involved in facilitating dialogue and opening a dialogic space in English classrooms. Educational theorists conceptualise a dialogic space as an opening (Bouton et al., 2024) or a space that is ‘opened,’ ‘widened’ and ‘deepened’ (Wegerif, 2011, 2024). What

this research has shown is that while a dialogic space may be said to be ‘opened up’ – in practical terms there is a lot of pedagogical groundwork that underpins this move. Indeed, this project has highlighted (see 5.2 and 5.3) the relational, attitudinal and curriculum related work (i.e., organisation of activities, design of units etc.) that are associated with opening up spaces for dialogue. While I have used the language of ‘opening’ throughout the thesis, the research has also highlighted the skilled, difficult and multifaceted ground work that English teachers perform in generating opportunities for productive dialogue about current issues. For this reason, it might be more appropriate to describe the work of teachers in terms of *constructing* a dialogic space. This not to take away from the role of students or context in shaping dialogue, nor is it intended to constrain the spontaneity or openness of free-flowing possibilities inherent in such spaces (Bouton et al., 2024). Rather, thinking about dialogic spaces in this way highlights the background pedagogical work that enables genuine encounters and an interplay of voices to take place. Thinking about dialogic spaces as *constructed* likewise highlights the fact that dialogic approaches to teaching and learning are not always valued in educational systems today (Segal, Snell, et al., 2017). In this case, teachers need to imagine and work out what dialogue might look like in particular institutional and curricular contexts.

7.4 Overarching finding 3

- ***Classroom dialogue looks different across settings and with different teachers.***

One of the most important findings has been that what classroom dialogue looks and feels like varies across different classrooms. In part this is in response to the student cohort and circumstances teachers and students find themselves in. As Polly, who works with a lot of students who struggle with literacy makes clear, the abuse and neglect that some students experience in their personal lives appear to fuel mistrust and misbehaviour in the classroom, and this inevitably complicates the possibility for sustained and open dialogue. This speaks to relatively high levels of disruptive student behaviour in Australian schools (OECD, 2023). Moreover, when I generated my data in 2022, my participants were still clearly

struggling with the social impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns, a point that is echoed resoundingly in the literature (Fray et al., 2023). In the process of rebuilding students' trust and ability to interact effectively in face to face environments, participating teachers acknowledged and embraced the reality that some dialogue consisted of simple back and forth exchanges. Both of these points are significant because they highlight that classroom dialogue does not happen in a vacuum.

The point about COVID-19 from the data highlights a broader point that what happens in classrooms is invariably constrained by factors outside of the control of teachers and students. Students and teachers are not immune from global headwinds. As noted in the introduction, Robinson et al. (2021) identified a series of "cascading crises" (p. 1608) that the pandemic triggered, including deepening inequality, challenges with employment and economic instability, misinformation and social isolation. Added to these are other challenges that Aly et al. (2022) argue confront education today. These include "catastrophic climate change and ecological collapse,... political upheaval and social unrest, alongside widening inequality, increasing fear and hate" (p. 357). No doubt these bear down on families and hence may well impact students' ability to engage with others respectfully, and embrace the implied optimism about the future and shared commitment to a community that dialogue entails.

In addition to this, one of the most interesting findings from this study has been its illustrations of the uniqueness and particularity of classroom dialogue and the role of teachers' personal and professional identities in shaping classroom dialogue. This is broadly in line with research which has drawn attention to the role that identity plays in relation to students' literacy learning and successful literacy teaching (Cummins et al., 2015; Wilson, 2021; Wilson & Rennie, 2019). Teachers in my study hold differing views about the importance of classroom discussion. These range from the view that it is a tool to develop communication skills, a way to generate multiple perspectives, a method to exchange and refine ideas, a unique feature of Australian schooling, and a key part of the construction of civil and democratic society.

Not only do their views vary depending on their own professional values and identities, so do the roles and dialogic ‘moves’ (Cui & Teo, 2021) they see themselves performing – at least in their reports of classroom practice. David’s case is telling. He recalls with fondness his own adolescent experience of being part of an English class with a teacher who engaged students in open discussion about issues in the media. This personal history seemed to connect to how he sees his role as a facilitator and model of critical thinking and curiosity, which he reported enacting through asking probing questions to elicit alternative views and to challenge and extend student thinking. In a similar fashion, in Sanja’s work primarily as an EAL teacher, she relishes the opportunity to expand her students’ thinking. A line can be drawn by implication between her intercultural experience as an interpreter and as a migrant to Australia and this position, which she enacts by making connections to lived experience and challenging students’ preconceived ideas.

These findings suggest that promoting dialogue affirms a view of English teaching as a social practice. It involves nuanced and relational work – a reality that often goes missing from neoliberal discourses about education (Kostogriz & Doেকে, 2013; Wescott, 2021) which portray teaching as a mechanistic delivery of standardised content (Brass, 2015; Brown et al., 2021). Despite what might be expected of them in terms of the standardisation of their practice, English teachers still need to navigate the complex reality of classroom life complicated by students with differing social, emotional and educational needs. Teachers are also shaped by their own experiences and values (Mockler, 2011). This implies that there is an richness to the dialogic practices in unique English classrooms– a point that makes sense when classrooms are viewed as spaces of knowledge generation and not merely knowledge transfer (Yandell, 2017). This research adds to this line of argument by drawing attention to the personal and embodied nature of teacher dialogic practices.

7.5 Overarching finding 4

- ***Teachers and their students can be hesitant to participate in classroom dialogue about social and political issues, and teachers manage this through a metaphorical mask.***

The study has drawn attention to the challenges that English teachers face in navigating the cultural politics of classroom dialogue. These challenges appeared to differ somewhat along subject area lines. On the one hand, EAL teachers such as David and Sanja expressed caution about offending their students' cultural sensibilities. Dimble communicated that he did not want to offend students when it came to issues of media bias in cases where students from different part of the world hold strong views about the media (as it operates in other parts of the world). Such views, he suggested, are not just intellectual propositions but worldviews anchored in familial and national loyalties. More broadly in other classroom discussions, Sanja expressed how acutely aware she was of her students' religious and cultural views about social and sexual relationships. This complication is at times compounded by the presence of integration aides who potentially share those views.

On the other hand, one of the most striking findings from the research was the ways that mainstream English teachers and students appear to express hesitation and concern when approaching highly charged issues related to race, gender and global conflict, in classroom conversations. Despite attempts to build a safe and inclusive classroom, Francesca sensed that her students were afraid of saying the 'wrong thing' when participating in discussions about the issue of 'Black Lives Matter'. Similarly, Dimble had a sense that some topics, such as government policies and initiatives relating to gender, were off-limits for some of his students. Added to this are the teachers who, like Polly, fear that they will appear racist when discussing cultural identity. Of course, anxiety about what to say, or whether to say anything, in these contexts is understandable and speaks to students' strategies of avoiding controversy, as borne out in the literature (Hess, 2009b; Pollak et al., 2018; Sabey, 2022).

There is a much broader context that needs to be taken into account when explaining such apprehensions. In the first place, this may be evidence of the argument that Australians do not like to talk about politically contentious topics and topics such as climate change, global conflict and social justice (Evanson, 2016; Fisher et al., 2023). In addition to this, teachers and students find themselves in the crosshairs of a cultural conflict over values and speech that extends beyond the classroom (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). As outlined in Chapter Six, schools are not immune to heated debates about social issues about race, gender, climate change and global conflict. Nor are students and teachers ignorant of disputes about free speech and media spectacles and commentary associated with so-called ‘cancel culture’ (Harrison & Williams-Cumberbatch, 2022). In addition, teachers are given conflicting messaging about the required roles of teachers and schooling. On the one hand, the curriculum and some political leaders argue that Australian schools are places where students can learn to be democratic citizens and speak freely and openly (Grace & Eddie, 2023). On the other hand, recent experience of teaching about the conflict in Gaza (Khairat, 2023) shows that teachers in Australia who engage in critical conversations in schools are increasingly vulnerable to public accusations of indoctrination and professional neglect (see Chrysanthos & Baker, 2021; Donnelly, 2024). No wonder, as Francesca put it, teaching about current issues can feel like “a minefield.”

In this context, this research has highlighted how English teachers can use and offer students a range of strategies for conveying certain ideas in ways that could not necessarily be traced back to them. Drawing on Polly’s contribution, I have described this in terms of ‘hiding behind a mask’ (see 6.3). Examples of this include fleshing out reported opinions (e.g., what have you heard?), imagining hypothetical situations (i.e., what might x person say?), engaging in role-based exchanges, or speaking as an unidentified subject in order to inject an idea or pose a question. Of course, these activities may well be used as a matter of tradition or preference, but given the data from this study, and the current cultural and political context, there is good reason to believe that the strategies can also be used to

avoid becoming personally implicated in the broader cultural conflicts engulfing society. The strategy of hiding behind a mask represents a mediating move as a response to debates about cancel culture and free speech in that students share and discuss different views without it becoming personal.

While downplaying or disguising one's identity in a conversation might have personal utility in a context where there is a perceived threat, it raises a range of theoretical, ethical and practical questions about the possibilities for dialogue about current issues today. The attempt to obscure (behind a mask) who is really doing the speaking, or who 'owns' the idea being conveyed, runs the risk of undermining the relational quality of dialogue. This concern aligns with a point made in Sabey's (2022) powerful analysis of students' moves during discussion of political issues. For Sabey (2022), dialogue can only be dialogue when people take ownership of their positions. In that case, presenting what other people have said about an issue (e.g., 'some people say that...') without clearly stating one's own position represents or at least might represent a sort of strategic ventriloquism. While such a position might be a way to foster empathy for others, it might also be construed as ethically problematic. This is because parroting other people's views without owning them such as in 'playing the devil's advocate' can be perceived as aggressive – as is the case for some people in discussions of race (Rupert, 2017). Likewise, the guise of anonymity leads to equally serious questions about authenticity.

Yet there are problems with opposition to anonymity in dialogue. For one, not everyone always knows where they stand on an issue, and so exploring the voices of others might be evidence of a position under-construction, and it might be better to just admit one's thinking is a work in progress. Moreover, Sabey's (2022) position is based on the assumption that all human interaction can and ought to be unquestionably honest and genuine in every situation. This position is complicated by Lefstein's (2006) point that classroom discussion involves a degree of performance as students present themselves to each other in different ways – a position supported by the dynamic identity work that can happen in literacy instruction (Cummins et al., 2015; Wilson, 2021; Wilson & Rennie, 2019). Similarly, from an

interactional point of view, a call for openness involves a high degree of vulnerability and risk, and so there are good reasons why some people may conceal what they really think. In a hyperconnected world where what people say and do can 'go viral', it is understandable that a dialogic imperative for openness with one's interlocutor needs to be finely balanced against threats to one's own standing. Conceding these points allows for the prospect that dialogue about current issues is still possible even if through a sort of pragmatic ventriloquism. In the end, it is simply impossible to be certain about what is happening 'behind the mask.'

In reflecting on this dilemma, the findings suggest no dialogue is perfect. The challenges and tensions related to engaging in dialogue about current events and issues are not just topical. The way such discussions are managed can be fraught with practical and ethical challenges (Juzwik et al., 2013). Rather than run from this inevitability, teachers and students can learn to embrace the messiness of interaction, and they can work through misunderstandings as they arise in a spirit of compassion and respect for the dignity of others (Callan, 2020).

There is another implication here for thinking about dialogic space. If teachers and students are negotiating the cultural politics around them, then the dialogic space is also a political space. This echoes Lambirth's (2015) point that the dialogic space is, in many ways, a radically democratic idea. More broadly, treating classrooms as spaces for the negotiation of beliefs, values and power is in line with a long tradition of critical research that sees English classrooms as sites of ideological production (Doecke et al., 2006; Pennycook, 1994), texts as ideologically loaded (Luke, 2018) and teachers as cultural actors (Giroux, 2020). Furthermore, it resonates with research that points to the particular socio-political forces that shape classroom approaches to conversations about social issues (Ho et al., 2014; Pollak et al., 2018). This is not a novel finding. It reinforces Lambirth's (2015) and Lefstein's (2006) views that power dynamics as well as cultural and political conditions must be taken into account in analyses of classroom dialogue.

7.6 Overarching finding 5

- ***English teachers navigate a range of professional tensions and dilemmas when it comes to engaging in dialogue about current issues.***

This study's account of English teachers navigating an ideological minefield when they promote dialogue about current issues in the media highlights the professional tensions that they face. A range of these challenges have already been highlighted in the findings: balancing professional values against neoliberal priorities; promoting open exchange of ideas as well as maintaining a respectful classroom environment (Juzwik et al., 2013); and mobilising and challenging ingrained views and interpretations.

Perhaps the most striking dilemma was David's when it came to his struggle with teaching about media bias in an intercultural context where students' national and family loyalties needed to be taken into account. While this is only one example, it echoes calls to take into account the role of values and identities in information and media literacy (Baer, 2019). David's experience also suggests that literacy can never be divorced from ideological questions – which is a point taken up vigorously by critical literacy (Luke, 2012). In David's case, his wrangling with the question of how to teach media bias in culturally diverse settings points to the role of culture in shaping both how people approach topics and the norms for engaging in dialogue. Given the significant sociocultural diversity among students in secondary English classrooms in Australia, the example echoes Fadel and Preston's (2017) call for teachers to be provided with more support in relation to intercultural communication.

These and other complications that English teachers face are frequently acknowledged in the literature on classroom dialogue. Scholars have drawn attention to other tensions that are gestured at but perhaps not specifically addressed in my study. These range from balancing convergence and divergence – that is to say between valuing the expression of all voices and fostering a shared world view (Mayer et al., 2024) – through to teacher disclosure (Geller, 2020) and neutrality about controversial issues and the handling of surprising comments and challenges (Juzwik et al., 2013). Other

broader challenges relate to embedding and enacting a dialogic pedagogy in the face of institutional constraints (Bouton et al., 2024; Lefstein, 2006). Research suggests that early career teachers in particular find themselves negotiating different expectations about what teaching should be and should look like that are shaped by teacher mentors, perceived curriculum mandates and a teacher's own beliefs and experiences (Dunn, 2018). No doubt added to this list is the memory and experience of being a student in a particular school system and institutional setting.

In these cases and in this research project, the implication for practice and theory is to see the dialogic space as a dilemmatic space (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013). In that dilemmatic space, English teachers negotiate a range of expectations and ideas about teaching when they strive to become dialogic teachers. These dilemmas should be seen not as a problem or fault of a particular pedagogical approach but a way of thinking about pedagogy itself. As Lefstein (2006, pp. 7-8) so powerfully puts it:

Rather than looking at dialogue as an ideal that we should aim to achieve – as a predetermined solution – the pragmatic approach sees dialogue as a problem – riddled with tensions – with which we are constantly confronted. Resolving these tensions is usually not a matter of choosing between dialogue or monologue, but between competing dialogical concerns and participant interests...

Approaching dialogue pragmatically means being cognizant of and sensitive to these trade-offs.

(Lefstein, 2006, pp. 7-8)

Of course, thinking about dialogic education in these terms does not sit comfortably with an increasingly popular discourse around education in Australia proffered in 'evidence-based practices' and uncomplicated official narratives of standards of practice which fail to take a full account of the complex, relational aspects of teaching beyond performance in assessments (Parr et al., 2015; Wescott, 2021).

7.7 Conclusion

Taken together, what do these overarching findings mean? While many of them are useful and relevant to teachers of all disciplines, my study is focused on English teachers in Victoria, Australia. In light of this, to make sense of these findings for this group, my study has intentionally put them in conversation with debates about the current status of the English teaching profession.

I argue that the English teaching profession in Australia is at a critical juncture. Around the world both in person and online, there is a noticeable deterioration of public discourse (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021). This coarsening is fuelled by polarisation (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019), misinformation and culture wars (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). It is driving people apart at a time when urgent crises such as climate change necessitate collective responses and shared commitment to the future of the planet. It is in this context of a breakdown in communication and other complex issues English teachers can play a key role in contributing to the stability and flourishing of democracies like Australia (Barton et al., 2024; Riddle, 2022a). Learning to engage in dialogue with others about social and political issues is a demonstration of informed and active citizenship that education in Australia sets out to provide to its students (Education Council, 2019). The literature suggests that it is not up to civics and citizenship teachers to do this work alone (Mirra et al., 2018; Spanke, 2021). And yet, this study has shown some English teachers' awareness that the democratic potential of English teaching appears lost on policymakers today.

As has been noted at different points throughout this thesis, English teachers today find themselves working within a neoliberal system that militates against the time and space for open, democratic dialogue about questions and issues that interest students. The teachers in my study recognise that denying, or practising wholly outside of those imperatives is not possible. While they acknowledge that there is scope within parts of the curriculum for the study of current issues, they appear to see the classroom increasingly represented in policy as a space to train students in the employment-enabling

skills of reading and writing as they are measured in standardised and high stakes assessments, and to expose them to the literary canon, rather than a space of critical inquiry into language, media and power (Bacalja, 2023; Snyder, 2008). As a result of increasing regulation, measurement and media scrutiny – English teachers feel compelled to narrow their practice and teach to the test (Gannon, 2012; Loyden, 2015; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020).

Some of the conversations conducted with participants in this study suggest that this approach to the teaching of English deprives students of a fuller social and political engagement with the subject. It divorces the study of English from questions of how to live with others and how to live well and care for our world. With increasing moves to de-politicise the profession, it is tempting to lament with Gibbons (2016) that “the study of both language and literature is increasingly a matter of analysis of form and structure, as if these things somehow existed in a benign state, independent of belief, motivation and ideology” (p. 36). In Gibbons’ (2016) view, the current system undermines the political and transformative aspirations of new English teachers who are “seldom encouraged to pursue their visions, to take risks or to think radically, for fear of falling foul of the system” (p. 36). Teachers who fail to stick to the script can find themselves the object of suspicion and censure.

Yet this de-politicisation of the study of language and text is antithetical to what many in the profession believe lies at the heart of robust English education (Sawyer, 2006b). Professional bodies such as the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) put citizenship at the heart of English teaching – envisaging the subject as a space for the development of “powerfully literate citizens” who understand that “language lies at the heart of active participation in personal and community life” (AATE, 2007, p. 16). Likewise, in a 2023 declaration, the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association that literacy involves the ability to “respond critically and creatively to produce a variety of texts...of personal, social, cultural, aesthetic, historical, economic and political importance” and well as the ability to “pose, explore and respond flexibly to local, national and global issues, problems and challenges”

(ALEA, 2023, p. 1). Writing almost two decades ago, Wayne Sawyer (2006b) argued that teaching English “has always been a project with political implications” (p. 20). He argued that citizenship should be at the heart of an “ambitious” and “intelligent modern curriculum”, aimed at not just the “creation of functionally literate citizens” but also the “creation of citizens who can critique the language of the media and those in power” (p. 21). In this view, the study of English is fundamentally outward looking to the social and political worlds around students.

In this debate, it is instructive to consider the history of the profession in England and Australia (Gibbons, 2017). A historical perspective shows that the ways English teachers and administrators think about English teaching has changed over time (Diamond & Bulfin, 2021; Gibbons, 2017). The case of varying approaches to classroom talk across time is noteworthy. Looking back two decades ago, The Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA, 2002) composed in the early 2000s emphasised the importance of extensive and rich teacher-student talk. These standards referred to the “the central role of oral language in literacy development and knowledge construction and the importance of sustained dialogue between students, and between teacher and students” (STELLA, 2002a, 1.3, para.3). Learning to listen to and speak with others was to be given “focused attention” (STELLA, 2002b, p. para. 1) and oral communication was seen as “a basis for writing and reading and critical thinking” as well as “negotiating values and identity” (para. 4). This is in acute contrast to current AITSL standards which frame classroom communication in purely instrumental terms as a means to student engagement and achievement (see AITSL standards 3.5 (Leadership, 2024). In this way, the STELLA standards had a greater sense of the relational and affective dimensions of English teaching than the current AITSL standards (Gannon, 2012).

This highlights the ways in which claims about the nature and aims of English teaching are open to ongoing debate. As Gerrard (2015) points out, “public education has always been an incomplete and contested project, always in the making” (p. 865). Similarly, Doecke (2019) argues that the history of

subject English “comprises a dialogical play between...successive generations [who] have sought to find the intellectual and ideological resources to respond to the challenges posed by the society around them” (p. 341). Writing in the past ten years during a time of increasing standards-based reforms, Doecke et al. (2014) summarised the contestation around the aims of English teaching in the contemporary era in this way: “the fundamental question remains as to whether the work of educators should be directed towards producing ‘spelling-punctuation-grammar producing machines’ or ‘communicating beings’” (p. 10). The image of a communicating being is one who can engage in dialogue with others about the world around them, and as such it links back to the notion of English teaching for citizenship and community. While there have been longstanding traditions that connect literacy with civic life (Freire, 1972), it is reasonable to suggest that English teachers in Australia who have this outlook are struggling for a space and a voice in an environment that is saturated by neoliberal, standards-based ideology. In this line of thinking, one of the key questions that this project grapples with is whether the profession or the professional can any longer accommodate an expansive, socially and politically empowering view of English teaching or whether this vision for the profession has been irreversibly eroded by neoliberal reforms.

Against this backdrop, it is clear from my findings that the participating English teachers, at least, are still very much alive to the democratic possibilities of their profession. They position their work as English teachers in terms of social practice rather than merely a technical accomplishment. They are committed to ensuring their students have a flourishing public life, and through taking the time to talk about current events and issues as they arise in the course of studying texts, they are helping to prepare their students to become active, critical and informed citizens who can engage with people who may share different views from them. As such, the study draws attention to the important cultural and civic work that English teachers perform. In doing so, I locate the study in a critical tradition (Doecke et al., 2006; Freire, 1997; Giroux, 2020) which regards teachers as agents of cultural change and “public

intellectuals willing to connect pedagogy with the problems of public life” (Giroux, 2020, p. 4). In summary, this civic and cultural work involves English teachers navigating a range of professional and pedagogical challenges in order to construct authentic dialogic spaces in which they and their students can exchange views about reports and issues in the media.

However, doing this cultural and civic work involves imagining education and re-imagining a world beyond the current moment. Participants in my study demonstrate that it is possible to develop qualities that are not readily found in standardised tests such as care, curiosity, media literacy, world knowledge and the ability to listen and respond to others. In many ways, my findings align with those (Doecke et al., 2024; Doecke et al., 2014) who argue that a new generation of English teachers are not slavishly accepting a standards-based vision of education. In their view, teachers are retaining a degree of criticality, and this suggests that “it is a neoliberal fantasy to suppose that the thoughts and actions of teachers can be fully regulated by standards” (Doecke et al., 2014, p. 11). Put another way, through successfully engaging their students in curriculum-relevant, contextually-shaped dialogue about the issues playing out in the media around them, participants in this study demonstrate that English teaching *for* citizenship is not a relic of the past. As such, they offer hope for the future of the profession and for young people today.

Having discussed the findings and what they mean for English teachers and English teaching, I turn next to reviewing the significance of the research, and I outline the contribution of this research to different fields and draw out relevant implications and recommendations for various stakeholders.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

I don't think you can mandate it [classroom discussion about news]. I don't think you can put it in a curriculum because curriculums just screw things up...I just – I think I foresee a world where teachers have enough time to actually care enough. (Dimble)

8.1 Introduction

Dimble made this comment at the end of the focus group after I had specifically asked the participating teachers what they might change in the English curriculum in order to make more space for discussions about current issues in the media. His comment struck me at the time, and has prompted me to think boldly about what this project means for English teaching and the stakeholders associated with it. Dimble's words have provoked me to think against the grain, and imagine what a powerful democratic education might look like in a subject English context. This approach to thinking schooling anew informs what my study might contribute to the conversations in research and policy about the aims and directions of subject English education, and in this chapter I set out the contribution the study makes.

In Chapters Four to Seven, I gave an account of my analysis of the data generated through interviews and focus groups. In Chapter Seven, I discussed these findings at length – what they mean and why they matter to English teachers and those involved in the English teaching profession in Australia today. In this chapter, I return to the research questions (8.2) and provide a response to each of them based on the analysis and findings detailed in this study. Following this, I discuss the contribution and significance of this project, and consider the implications for English teachers, and for other key stakeholders such as school leaders, policy makers, curriculum writers, researchers, as well as ITE providers (8.3). Given the value but also the complexity of English teachers promoting dialogue in classrooms, I argue that more can be done by these stakeholders to help teachers feel supported. This is not achieved by simply

making teachers feel better in a superficial sense, but by orienting schools, educational systems and educational research toward democratic ends (Aly et al., 2022; Riddle & Apple, 2019). In closing out the chapter, I outline future directions for further research (8.4) and conclude with a few final thoughts about the project (8.5).

8.2 Returning to research aims and questions

This project has sought to generate a situated and contextualised understanding of the discussions that secondary English and EAL teachers have with their students about current issues in the media. Underlying the research has been the view that classrooms are political spaces and that education is intimately connected to public life (Dewey, 1916; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Specifically, the project has been interested in how the English teachers promote dialogic ways of thinking and relating to others about current issues. The opening of a dialogic space in which people value a difference is important, given the signs of a deterioration in considered public discourse (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021). Many people, it would seem, are just unwilling to give time and space to listening to others and their views about current issues. This is reflected in the rise of sharply divergent ways of seeing the world in a 'post-truth' era (Alexander, 2019; Lewandowsky et al., 2017), as well as the proliferation of misinformation (Bradshaw et al., 2021) and increasing social and political polarisation around the globe (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019) and in Australia (Barnes, 2022; Edelman, 2023). The ability to understand and engage in dialogue across difference (Bakhtin, 1981; Fitzgerald et al., 2023) and about topics and debates of public importance is vital given the global environmental and geopolitical crises young people face today. The ability to cooperate and work together is essential to addressing the global dilemmas the world faces today (UN Secretary General, 2021).

The research is underpinned by my belief that this democratic work is central to the aims of English teaching in Australia. This way of seeing English teaching connects with one of the ambitions of the *Mparntwe Declaration* to help young people learn to become active members of society who

“participate in Australia’s civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations” (Education Education Council, 2019, p. 8). I have argued that English teaching of this sort is about fostering “powerfully literate citizens” (AATE, 2007, p. 16) who can “pose, explore and respond flexibly to local, national and global issues, problems and challenges” (ALEA, 2023, p. 1).

While the focus of discussion, the experiences of young people, and their personal growth as citizens, fits with a progressive tradition of English teaching in post war England (Barnes, 1976; Dixon, 1969; Gibbons, 2017), it also builds on the strong ‘tradition’ of critical literacy in Australia – the national context for this particular project. Classroom dialogue about social issues is central to critical literacy (Vasquez et al., 2019). In subject English context, dialogue about current issues is likely to emerge as teachers and students in junior (ACARA, 2022d) and senior levels (i.e., VCE,) examine the representation of issues in the media. The sorts of dialogue that emerge in these activities can enable students and teachers to see how language and texts shape them and their worlds (Luke, 2000). As students and teachers examine different viewpoints and the values and assumptions that underpin the production of such texts, they take up what Luke (2018) argues to be “the practical aim” of critical literacy – namely, “to generate vigorous classroom debates over what texts attempt to do” (p. 175).

While there is scope provided in the Australian Curriculum English for examining the presentation of current issues (see Chapter 1), and thus talking about the issues themselves, relatively little is known about what these conversations look like and how teachers promote dialogic ways of thinking and relating to others through them. This study addresses this area of research by responding to the following main question and three subsidiary questions:

Main question: How do secondary English teachers in Australia promote classroom dialogue about current issues in the media?

Subsidiary questions:

1. How do English teachers who promote dialogue about current issues conceptualise their work?
2. From a practical perspective, how do teachers generate classroom dialogue about current issues?
3. What challenges do those teachers encounter, and how do they address these?

In answering these questions, I adopted the definition of a ‘current issue’ as an “important subject that many people are discussing or thinking about at the present time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), which I argue is typically a problem in society about which there are a range of views (see VCAA, 2022). From a methodological point of view, I adopted a qualitative case study research design (Yin, 2009). The data for the project consisted of reports of practice of transcripts in extended interviews and focus group with six participant English teachers in Victoria, Australia. At the time I generated the data, all of the participants were practicing secondary English teachers working in different sectors (i.e., government and independent) and with different levels of teaching experience – with half of the them teaching EAL and the other three teaching other English subjects (i.e., English, English Language, English Literature) across junior and senior levels.

To analyse the data, I utilised Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2019b), which enabled me to identify patterns and tell a story about the data. In order to connect my analysis with the opportunity for English teachers to facilitate productive dialogue about current issues, I adopted the view that reported attempts to promote such dialogue could be construed as attempts to open a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2011, 2013, 2024). I also drew upon the work of Lefstein and Snell (2013) to understand the dialogue within this space in three ways: as a way of being and relating to others; as a

way of thinking with others; and as civic engagement. Drawing on this framework helped me see the dialogic possibilities in the practices that teachers reported to me and their potential to help young people develop dialogic ways of thinking and relating to others. In doing so, they may well become better able to give space for diverging views about the world, and thus address the hostility and coarseness found in much public discourse today (Hoggan & Litwin, 2019; Lepoutre, 2021). (Hannon, 2023; Lepoutre, 2021)

In responding to the first subsidiary question, the study has shown that participating English teachers appear driven by a sense that addressing current issues will benefit their students. As noted previously, this has largely to do with their identity work and the way they position themselves and English teaching today. They see English teaching as a space not only to develop reading and writing but also critical thinking, communication skills, curiosity, media literacy, world knowledge and democratic habits. In addition, they see themselves and their work in different ways, including: integrating students into a news culture or society; ‘breaking down ignorance’ (Polly); developing community-mindedness and democratic habits; being a role model as a responsible adult; as well as helping students learn to engage critically with real world texts and issues.

Taken together, the teachers’ views of their profession resonate with a long and multifaceted heritage of what English teaching means. From the perspective of ‘models’ of English (Cox, 1989), their emphasis on the development of communication skills and critical thinking align with two of Cox’s models of English – namely adult skills and cultural analysis – while the acquisition of world knowledge and curiosity also speak to a view of English as being about personal growth (Cox, 1989; Dixon, 1969). From a typological perspective, the identities of teachers in the study appear to reflect a hybrid of three different types of English teachers: “liberal,” “technician” and “critical dissenter” (Marshall, 2001, p. 34). That is to say, those in my study appear to promote human flourishing, the development of students’ skills, foster student voice and a critical stance toward the world. Finally, from a subject point

of view, the varied responses also reflect the vastness of what is taught under the banner of English as a subject. As Gibbons (2017) states, the study of English promotes “growth, citizenship, an understanding of self, others, cultures, societies and histories, and strives to equip students to become experts of language in all the modes and forms it takes in the twenty-first century” (p. 161).

As noted in Chapter 7, the ways that the participating teachers framed their work and constructed their identities do not sit comfortably with the neoliberal framing of teaching in official policy discourses as a mechanical transmission of knowledge and discrete, decontextualised skills (Brass, 2015; Brown et al., 2021; Loyden, 2015). However, rather than working outside or against neoliberal expectations, the study has shown how these teachers find ways to enact their broader vision for English teaching licenced by the curriculum, but seemingly undercut by the unrelenting pressure to teach to the test (O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020). The contribution of this finding to the field of research into English teaching in Australia is that it reinforces two broader points in the literature about English teachers – namely that many teachers currently can adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves (Brown et al., 2021), and that standards-based reforms cannot entirely regulate the ways that teachers think and feel about their work (Doecke et al., 2014). In doing so, they draw on a pragmatic practice tradition of doing critical work within the confines of the institution (Marshall, 2001; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020).

Importantly, given the link between the discussion of issues and citizenship (Hess, 2004; Saetra, 2021), the findings also say something about the nature of democratic education. Specifically, they suggest that a teacher's personal and professional beliefs about the nature and purpose of English teaching really matter to the investment they make in empowering their students to become active and informed citizens (ACARA, 2021b; Education Council, 2019). This is in contrast to an increasingly popular view that what matters most in teaching is how technically accomplished an educator may be and how well they have mastered the mobilisation of key teaching strategies to achieve pre-determined and

limited outcomes (see Hattie, 2009; Training, 2017). While this study acknowledges that such technical knowledge is vital, the data from participants points to the value to democracy of English teachers who not only have well-developed skills, but also have a clear sense of what they are teaching *for* as well as how their teaching benefits society (Biesta, 2009). This work is crucial given that neoliberal discourses of education foreclose discussions of this larger purpose and focus on human capital understandings of the aims of education (Connell, 2013).

When it comes to addressing the second subsidiary question, the thesis has shown that initiating and sustaining dialogue about current issues in English classrooms is a multifaceted and complex task, demanding a degree of skill and tact on the part of teachers. I have argued that this is akin to the construction of a dialogic space (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2008; Wegerif, 2011; Wegerif & Major, 2019). Constructing a space for classroom dialogue requires pedagogical work. From the particular perspective of generating dialogue about issues, teachers need to make the events and debates in the media a topic for classroom dialogue, and allow students to raise issues that concern them, too. Several teachers in my study have noted how such conversations arise through structured units on new media literacy in junior secondary classrooms or when looking at language and argument in VCE. Beyond these curriculum-sanctioned moments, some of the teachers insert spaces for dialogue about current issues into their teaching on an ongoing basis – they make time for a routine weekly conversation about news or they start the lesson with a TikTok reel or the presentation of a provocative text such as a political tract. When it comes to actually initiating and maintaining dialogue, teachers respond to student questions in the moment or they expand on things they hear from students.

This focus on the particular construction of dialogue about contemporary issues in the media is also connected to and sustained by the broader, deeper work that English teachers perform to build a dialogic space in their classrooms. This work is messy and not always straightforward or possible, but in this study it did seem to involve not only the development of oral communication skills but also the

creation of a classroom environment in which students are responsive to each other. In several cases, there were differences between English and EAL teachers. Two EAL teachers in my study noted the importance of developing an environment in which students' personalities could come to the fore and in which they felt comfortable sharing their opinions. In contrast, other teachers of mainstream English emphasised the need to be explicit and deliberate in fostering respect and kindness by drawing attention to acceptable and unacceptable behaviour through classroom rules and interventions. One teacher alone adopted the language of 'safety' to describe the type of classroom she was creating. Despite these subtle differences, most teachers emphasised the fact that building the right classroom environment in which students can take risks and be vulnerable with each other takes time and work on the part of the English teacher. Their comments resonated with the literature about the importance of the emotional and relational work that goes into setting the groundwork for effective classroom dialogue about social issues (Garrett, 2020; Saetra, 2021; Wansink et al., 2023).

Most interestingly, the sorts of dialogic moves they report making appear to correspond to the ways they see their role as English teachers, which in turn reflects parts of their own professional identities. That is to say, a teacher's background and their views regarding the purposes of English teaching appear to play into the sorts of moves they report making in classes. A case in point is Francesca's personal preference for wanting to feel that she is an equal partner in a conversation, a preference which is reflected in the positionality of thinking *with* students about complex and contentious issues. This adds weight to the idea that English teaching is not an abstract or mechanical exercise, but a reflection of what they value and (Cassar et al., 2023) and their ongoing identity work (Buchanan, 2015; Parr, 2024).

Making this link between identity and practice is one of the strengths of this research project. Granted, the research is based on reports of dialogic practices. While it might be suggested that these reports are not as valuable or accurate as what 'actually' happens in the classroom, the research has shown that reports of practice and narratives of classroom events are powerful datasets. There is a

strong tradition of research which supports the value of narratives in particular (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020; Clandinin, 2016). Taken together, reports of events and practices can reveal what the teachers think, believe and value about educational dialogue. Given their prime pedagogical role in the classroom, understanding how teachers make sense of their experiences is crucial to understanding the decision-making that happens in the classrooms. Put simply, the study suggests that it is not just what ‘happens’ in the classroom that matters – it is also how teachers give meaning to their practice.

Of course, promoting dialogue in an English classroom does not come without challenges. In responding to the third subsidiary question, the study has highlighted the challenges that some teachers experience and notice around the discussion of sensitive topics and social issues. The fear of ‘saying the wrong thing’ was experienced and expressed differently among EAL and mainstream English teachers. EAL teachers expressly wanted to avoid offending students when trying to talk about culturally-held views. In contrast, one mainstream English teacher felt they might be distrusted when talking about race, and other mainstream teachers working in what they term ‘progressive’ schools noted that students seemed hesitant to approach thinking about different issues such as race and gender. From the reports of teachers, it seemed that some of the students in these examples were well aware of the cultural politics of the classroom and wider school context.

These apprehensions come against the backdrop of a series of constraining pressures on what teachers feel that they may or may not be able to say in schools. In light of intensifying culture wars (Inglehart & Norris, 2019) and so-called ‘cancel culture’ (Ng, 2022; Norris, 2023), teachers are being placed under pressure from both the political left and right. This cultural and political struggle is playing out in attempts to ban certain issues from being discussed in class (e.g., Critical Race Theory in the United States) or books that offend the sensibilities of conservative and progressive minds alike (Bach, 2023). Added to this are neoliberal attempts to reframe literacy as a technical, decontextualised skill with a component of Western cultural heritage (see Sawyer in Doecke et al., 2006; Snyder, 2008), as well

as life in a hyperconnected age in which what people say can be shared online by a host of people in an instant.

It is telling that in this context, teachers in my study appeared to offer students and themselves what one participant called a 'mask' – providing ways of expressing or voicing views without owning them through thinking hypothetically, relaying what others might be saying, or inserting the view of a non-descript participant (i.e., without a specific identity) into a discussion. This is a particularly important finding given the social and cultural backdrop to schooling today and shows English teachers and students navigating the broader social and cultural tensions around them. In this way, too, I have argued that a dialogic space about news and issues is also a dilemmatic space (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013). This reflects the view that teachers are constantly negotiating a range of professional, topical, discursive and interpersonal tensions. Rather than run from these challenges, I have argued that navigating them is part of what it means to be a professional engaged in democratic work and working out their professional identity as a teacher.

In summary, to answer the main research question, from the Findings it is clear that promoting dialogue about current issues involves engaging multifaceted work. Promoting dialogue starts with English teachers who believe that classroom dialogue about the issues playing out in the media matters; it originates in the personal and professional identities of these teachers. From a practical point of view, it involves constructing space for dialogue through linking dialogue to the curriculum, making media a topic of study, fostering a positive and responsive classroom environment, and developing communication skills. Similarly, the research has shown that promoting classroom dialogue is not without challenges. Teachers and students today live and work in a contentious political environment which impacts on the classroom. As such, they are confronted with different challenges associated with the topical nature of some discussions as well as building and expanding their students' thinking. These

dilemmas and tensions are a sign of transformational teaching; navigating them is a sign of professionalism.

8.3 Contribution and implications

As noted earlier, there is a paucity of research in Australia that looks specifically at the classroom dialogue about current issues in classrooms – especially English classrooms. As such, the project provides a unique exploration into struggles, motivations and practices of a select group of English teachers working in Victoria. While it is exploratory in nature, it does build on and contribute to research in English teacher professionalism, educational dialogue and democratic education. In addition, although it is impossible to draw widespread conclusions about English teaching in Australia from my small sample size, this research does help contribute to ongoing and timely conversations about English teaching and democratic education. Given the concerns about increasing polarisation and misinformation, the study suggests researchers and policymakers urgently need to think about how education might be *for* democracy (Riddle & Apple, 2019), and how we build a society in which dialogue across differences (Bakhtin, 1981; Fitzgerald et al., 2023) is valued (Boyd & Sherry, 2024). This study represents a valuable step in this direction.

Specifically, in terms of English teacher professionalism, as noted in previous chapters, the findings contribute to an understanding of the identity work of English teachers today in the face of neoliberalising pressures (Manuel et al., 2018; O'Sullivan & Goodwyn, 2020; Parr, 2024; Parr et al., 2020). In this context, the findings show that many teachers maintain an expansive vision of the profession, and their innovative practices in promoting dialogue demonstrate that they are not (at least yet or in this study) merely reduced to the deliverers of pre-packaged content (Brass, 2015; Loyden, 2015). While they are acutely aware of the encroaching standardisation of their practice, they forge and construct identities that are grounded in English teaching being for social and democratic ends and the needs of their own students. In this way, the research also builds on research by Riddle and colleagues

(Barton et al., 2024; Riddle, 2022a) in showing how English teaching in Australia can be *for* democracy today – describing the beliefs and values of teachers and also the practices that enable young people to become critical and informed citizens.

More broadly, the research also contributes to the study of political classroom discussions and educational dialogue. On the one hand, it extends the work of those researching the discussion of controversial issues (Cassar et al., 2023; Hess, 2009a; Saetra, 2021; Wansink et al., 2023) by illuminating how teachers facilitate and manage such discussions in English classrooms. In this way, in terms of the focus group of secondary English teachers, it expands on the work of Weeden and Bright (2020) who focused exclusively on EAL teachers in Australia. In addition to this, from the perspective of educational dialogue, the project builds on the work of Lefstein and Snell (2013) and adapts their work to analyse the dialogic possibilities evoked in reports of teaching practices. It also extends the notion of dialogic space (Wegerif, 2007, 2011, 2024) by using it as a framing device for dialogue about current issues in the media. In doing so, it re-emphasises the radically democratic potential of the dialogic space (Lambirth, 2015).

In light of the findings, there are a number of implications which flow from the study for educational stakeholders. In outlining the implications of this study, I make a deliberate choice not to offer prescriptions or gratuitous advice for teachers. So much of what has already been covered in this thesis has been about teachers. Rather than focus on teachers at this point, however, I want to think through what my study suggests for school and domain leaders, policymakers, researchers and ITE providers. The implications I discuss below all follow from the findings and are aimed at enabling teachers to engage in the powerful conversations I have described previously.

8.3.1 Implications for school leaders

There are a range of implications from the project for both executive (i.e., principal/head teacher) and middle leadership (i.e., domain area leaders). The implications relate to aspects of culture, philosophy, professional development and school protocols.

- *Foster a school culture that values educational dialogue.* Research demonstrates the importance of school culture in fostering an environment in which teachers engage in open discussions about current issues (Fadel & Preston, 2017; Journell, 2022; Peterson, 2020).

Opportunities for dialogue in schools are enhanced by a culture of trust, sharing and participation (Skarre Aasebø et al., 2017). School and domain leaders at all levels can play a significant role in helping teachers, and not just English teachers, value classroom dialogue. A whole school orientation toward inquiry and collaboration can help teachers feel that investing time and effort in engaging in dialogue is worthwhile and fits with the institutions' priorities.

- *Foster intercultural dialogue and cultural literacy.* This project has highlighted the role that cultural differences can have an impact how students and teachers interpret texts and participate in classroom dialogue (e.g., David's and Polly's examples of disagreements about global conflicts arising from cultural and religious differences). This builds on Fadel and Preston's (2017) findings that classroom interest in global events can depend on a student's background. These point to the need to develop teachers' and students' intercultural understanding – a cross curriculum priority in Australia (ACARA, 2024b). In this context, learning to engage with and respond to others involves developing the sort of cultural literacy which has dialogue at its core (Maine et al., 2019).

- *Promote professional development in educational dialogue.* Following from the first point, this research has highlighted the benefit for teachers in being able to engage in professional development related to improving classroom dialogue. Professional development that helps teachers inquire into their own dialogic practices is useful (Hennessy et al., 2021;

Lefstein & Snell, 2013). This professional development might also help teachers manage discussions about controversial issues, which is important in today's increasingly polarised world (Journell, 2022). School leaders have power over school-wide professional development; they can ensure that teachers have access to such opportunities.

- *Develop whole-school practices and norms for dialogue about current issues.* Rather than react negatively to the discussion of controversial issues in classroom (Khairat, 2023), school leaders can be proactive and create norms and expectations around classroom discussions of current issues. In creating the conditions for a dialogic space, they would need to outline behavioural expectations for such exchanges that balance what Callan (2020) calls 'civil candor' and 'interpretative charity' (i.e., open, respectful dialogue with a willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt). Clearly communicating these principles and guidelines would go some way to relieving the anxiety that can be associated with perceptions of a break down or backlash about difficult conversations about social and political issues (Journell, 2022).

- *Articulate and advocate for how education at the school level fosters democratic citizenship.* The teachers in this study are able to articulate a social and political vision of education. However, it should not fall to teachers alone to identify the contribution they make to civil society (Education Council, 2019). School administrators can take a proactive stance by communicating with students and parents how and why the school values discussions about current issues (Journell, 2022). As part of this, school leaders may connect this to a broader position about how the school is building the citizens of the future. Articulating this may also help teachers, especially English teachers, feel confident in what they are doing.

8.3.2 Implications for policymakers and curriculum writers

There are a range of implications of the study for policymakers and those responsible for writing the English curriculum at a state and national level in Australia (and elsewhere). These include officials in the Department of Education and bodies such as ACARA and VCAA.

- *Value teacher identities and support teachers to develop identities of their own.* The project has shown that when it comes to democratic education and broader investment in the profession, English teachers' values, identities and beliefs about education really matter (Manuel et al., 2019). Teaching is not enacted in spite of teacher identity, but as a reflection of teacher identities, which are worked out in response to the contextual and discursive landscape around them (Buchanan, 2015; Mockler, 2011). This challenges standards-based accounts of teaching as a mere technical accomplishment performed presumably by anyone with the right skills. Given the challenges in society as outlined previously, policymakers who are serious about the democratic purposes of schooling would do well to engage with the question of teaching as a social practice and the implications for how teacher professionalism and identity are framed in official discourses and standards.

- *Encourage educators to make connections between curriculum and current issues.* Making connections to issues playing out in the media arguably applies to all areas of study, and there have been attempts to incorporate social issues into science (Sadler, 2011). While it could be argued that teaching English is more open to making connections to students' lived experience than other subjects (Bomford, 2019), it is also the case that English teachers often feel constrained to narrow their practice to meet the demands of standardised tests (Brown et al., 2021). In this context, a radical suggestion would be to wholly re-orient the English curriculum around particular themes or ideas as is the case with the IB curriculum. A less radical proposal would be to give teachers – particularly at a senior level – more flexibility around text selection in order to integrate relevant authentic texts (i.e., news articles, videos, social media

posts etc.) into their teaching in ways that connect the study of literature with current issues.

This is exemplified in a recent change to the VCE English Study Design which encourages teachers to source supplementary texts to enhance the study of key ideas in set texts studied by students (VCAA, 2023).

- *Improve students' ability to engage with the substance of issues – starting with senior students.* Research indicates that students want the time and space to talk about social issues and that schools are an ideal place to show students how to do so in a tolerant and respectful way (Journell, 2022; Peterson, 2020). Given their proximity to voting age, this is especially important at a senior level in Victoria, students need to be able to show that they understand and can engage substantively with contemporary social issues as well as analyse texts for their rhetorical strategies. In future, curriculum writers might want to give teachers more scope and flexibility to build knowledge about contemporary issues and licence time spent on engaging with the substance of arguments in class. To make the learning meaningful, teachers might negotiate what issues and arguments to focus on with students (Green, 2021). Officially granting this scope would also give teachers a degree of protection from conservative commentators who might accuse individual teachers of indoctrinating their students (see Donnelly, 2023)

- *Increase focus on oracy in English classrooms.* There is evidence that the drive to perform on standardised tests such as NAPLAN in secondary English is pushing teachers to focus heavily on print-based literacies such as reading and writing (Ollerhead, 2022; Portelli & O'Sullivan, 2016). Yet, if students are to learn to engage in dialogue with others about contemporary issues as citizens, they need to be able to effectively communicate their views orally as well as in writing. Coleman (2014) notes that most “civic action tends to involve the utterance or exchange of words” (p. 415). In this way, developing a young person’s ability to use language to share, probe and articulate their own and another person’s views is likely to benefit

them as young citizens as they engage in dialogue in face to face and online settings. English teachers and professional teaching bodies in Australia have long recognised the importance of developing oral language (Foundation Touchstones for Literacy and Learning, 2024; STELLA, 2002b). Teachers can utilise the professional learning resources at their disposal in Australia (Edwards-Groves et al., 2014) as well as draw on resources from the UK (see Mercer et al., 2017).

8.3.3 Implications for researchers and ITE providers

In addition to policymakers, the project has a range of implications for researchers and providers of initial teacher education (ITE).

- *Foreground the importance of identity work in teacher education.* The project has shown that a teacher's backstory and how they conceptualise their work (Buchanan, 2015; Mockler, 2011) shape what it means to be an English teacher invested in democratic education and educational dialogue. Building on existing work in this area (Parr, 2024; Parr et al., 2023), pre-service teachers need time and space to think about what they bring to the profession and how they view English teaching at a time when effective teaching is increasingly seen as the mastery of skills and strategies.
- *Continue research into the enactment of dialogic teaching.* This project has built on a long tradition of research into classroom dialogue (Alexander, 2020; Cui & Teo, 2021; Mercer, 2000; Nystrand, 1997). Through reports of practice, the study has highlighted the richness and particularity of dialogic practices, and the connection between professional identities, school contexts and teaching practices. In doing so, it has highlighted the embodied and contextual nature of dialogic teaching, and the value of continuing research into the enactment of dialogic teaching by teachers in different cultural and educational settings (Dunn, 2018). This research is

a vital in humanizing education in the face of the push to view English teaching as the de-contextualised (Loyden, 2015) transmission of knowledge

- *Provide pre-service English teachers with a grounding in educational dialogue.*

Educational dialogue is relevant to all disciplines and levels of teaching. Building on recommendations for dialogic approaches to be embedded in ITE (Janfada et al., 2022), this project calls for renewed attention to be paid in tertiary English teaching programs to providing pre-service teachers with a philosophical and practical grounding in educational dialogue. This would help new teachers enter the classroom with a toolkit of resources and concepts from which to draw in order to better facilitate dialogue.

- *Promote the idea of teaching as a social practice.* Increasingly in policy circles, teaching is seen as a skilled and measurable transmission of knowledge and a collection of generic technical skills rather than a practice that is shaped by teachers, students and context (Turvey et al., 2012; Yandell, 2017). For rich, democratic dialogue about contemporary issues to take place in schools, there needs to be a strong philosophical grounding for classroom exchanges. For example, sociocultural theory (Mercer, 2000; Vygotskiĭ, 1987) is a prominent but certainly not the only theory to offer such a grounding. As such, educational scholars and teacher educators would do well to advance a broadly humanistic approach to teaching that values teacher beliefs and knowledge and which measures success in terms of a teacher's responsiveness to student needs (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013).

8.4 Limitations

The research focus in this study has been on investigating beliefs and reports of practices related to classroom dialogue about contemporary issues in the media. As explained in the Methodology (see 3.3.2), the decision to focus on reports of practice was made purposefully and out of necessity in light of governmental restrictions on in-school research at the time in Victoria in the wake of extended COVID

lockdowns. Clearly, reports of practice are not the same as observations of practice. On the other hand, reports of practice provide valuable insights into how teachers themselves make sense of their work in the classroom and how they situate that work in relation to the English teaching profession – insights that are unavailable through observational data alone. Ideally, having access to both reports of practice and classroom observations would allow for an even richer response to the research questions.

In addition, the small number of participants might be said to limit the extent to which the claims made can be generalisable to cover all English teachers in Australia. However, making such broad claims was never the intent of the project. Rather, in keeping with a case-study research design, my intent was to develop in-depth and nuanced accounts of practice (appropriate for a PhD). Likewise, while my participants work in independent as well as public schools in inner and outer suburbs of Melbourne, the findings based on data from my dialogues with them cannot possibly speak for the experiences of all English teachers throughout Australia. This is why I have positioned this research explicitly as adding to and building on the conversation about the role of English teaching in promoting citizenship today. Given this, the research project is exploratory in nature.

8.5 Directions for future research

Given the richness of access to both reports of practice and classroom observations, future research could document and analyse actual interactions in class – not as a way of testing to see if teachers are telling the truth about what they report in interviews – but as a way of understanding how they enact dialogue about issues in context. In addition, the future research could expand the number of participants in order to glean a broader range of teacher beliefs and experiences. The range of teachers, the number of participants and their geographical locations could be expanded to include other states of Australia as well as rural areas.

In addition, future research might look at classroom dialogue about current issues across curriculum areas. This thesis has promoted the idea that helping young people become informed and articulate

citizens is not the duty of civics and citizenship teachers alone. Nor is it solely the duty of English teachers to help students become effective communicators. Hence, future research might look into dialogue about issues in other subject areas in order to show how schools as a whole can contribute to the social and political empowerment of young people today.

8.5 Conclusion: Towards English classrooms where making meaning *matters*

During my time as a PhD student, I had the opportunity to teach several groups of pre-service teachers. One unit in particular was about teaching critical and creative thinking. As part of workshops, in order to make the content meaningful to my students, I often invited them reflect on their own experiences as secondary students – memorable teachers and activities they could recall as well as the things they had learnt. What struck them as they did this was a realisation that although they had all experienced success in high school, they remembered little of what they had learnt in terms of curriculum content. University classes turned into self-help groups as students preparing to become teachers themselves expressed their regret at never having really owned or been part of what they were being taught in school. They had been prepared for and performed well on exams and assignments, but their secondary education had amounted to an institutional performance rather than a personally meaningful and memorable experience.

I want to be generous to their teachers and the limits of human memory. I am sure that many of their teachers had the best intentions and probably did an excellent job. This project, if anything, is a way of acknowledging the powerful work that English teachers (especially those in my study) are already doing. Likewise, despite my best attempts, I am sure many of my students will probably have already forgotten the topics and questions we explored in class together. And yet, I wonder if there is a kernel of truth contained in their own reflections. The point is taken up by Dimble, who in my interview with him, made a striking observation that many students at his school who ask to move class cannot even recall the names of their peers in their existing class. Reflecting on this, he remarked that, “part of that issue

should be laid at the seat of pedagogy – what kind...of teaching would mean that you're never actually interacting with anyone in the room except for you and the teacher and maybe some shoulder buddies?"

Dimble is not alone in questioning pedagogical approaches that neglect to turn students toward each other. Biesta (2009) decries the current 'learnification of education' – that is a focus on learning and individual needs, which he argues misses the relational and social function of education. Rather, he makes a persuasive case that to really engage in education itself, those involved in and around schools need to think through the values that underpin what they are doing. Otherwise, they fall prey to blurring 'what works' for what is desirable and hence not really knowing what – beyond results – they are trying to achieve (Biesta, 2010). This speaks to the importance of the identity work teachers perform and its contribution to the future of the English teaching profession (Parr, 2024). In a similar vein, Arendt (1958) argues that teacher (Donnelly, 2023) authority is derived not from technical accomplishment or placing on league tables but in their "assumption of responsibility for [the] world" (p. 9). The teacher is not simply an expert in their field but "a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world" (p. 9). Teachers do not passively gesture to the world but by their pedagogy take responsibility for it and transform it for the better.

This thesis has consistently argued that English teachers can play a transformative role in the lives of their students today by promoting dialogue about current issues. Young people are entering an increasingly fractured and divided world where the ability to engage in dialogue about social and political issues is a vital asset, not only for individuals but as a way of fostering social cohesion. While there is no doubt that a robust grounding in the 'basic' literacy skills of reading and writing will remain core to English teaching, secondary students also need teaching that will help them deal with the communicative challenges they face. They need to be 'powerfully literate citizens' (Sawyer, 2006a). This view of literacy for social transformation is what Bill Green (2006) has in mind when he envisages English

classrooms that are “once again crucibles for student learning and social change, where making meaning *really matters*” (p. 373).

Arguably, though, making meaning matter starts with individuals feeling that they matter to each other. Putting it another way, in order to address the challenges of public life today, we need to foster a society in which our histories, identities, values and opinions mean something to each other. What is true of society is true of schools. And yet, in the neoliberal age of education today, teachers and students are treated as mere numbers (Ball, 2003). In this spirit, given the challenges society faces, the thesis raises serious ethical questions about the current state of teaching in Australia. Educators and policymakers need to consider how schools are fostering not only academic achievement but also the development of relationships and human connections. This project has sought to promote this ethical dimension of English teaching. While not every lesson will be replete with opportunities to engage in dialogue about current issues, English teachers can plan for and grasp these moments – firm in the knowledge that what they are doing really matters.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Human ethics approval



Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee

Approval Certificate

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and has granted approval.

Project ID: 32347
Project Title: Engaging young people in critical classroom discussions about news: a narrative inquiry of secondary English/EAL teachers in Australia.
Chief Investigator: Dr Sue Wilson
Approval Date: 12/05/2022
Expiry Date: 12/05/2027

Terms of approval - failure to comply with the terms below is in breach of your approval and the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*.

1. The Chief Investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation.
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must include your project number.
6. Amendments to approved projects including changes to personnel must not commence without written approval from MUHREC.
7. Annual Report - continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report.
8. Final Report - should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected completion date.
9. Monitoring - project may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
10. Retention and storage of data - The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

Kind Regards,

Professor Nip Thomson

Chair, MUHREC

CC: Mr Kirk Weeden, Assoc Professor Graham Parr

List of approved documents:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Supporting Documentation	Recruitment process flowchart	16/04/2022	2
Supporting Documentation	Guiding questions:prompts for interviews and focus groups	16/04/2022	2
Supporting Documentation	Ad for research project	18/04/2022	6
Consent Form	Consent form	18/04/2022	4
Explanatory Statement	Explanatory statement	05/05/2022	5

Appendix 2: Explanatory statement



EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Secondary English/EAL teachers

Project ID: 32347

Project title: Engaging young people in critical discussions about news in secondary English/EAL classrooms

Dr Sue Wilson
Faculty of Education
Phone: (03) 9905 2819
email: sue.wilson@monash.edu

Kirk Weeden
Phone : 0434928906
email: kirk.weeden1@monash.edu

As a secondary EAL/English teacher, you are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researchers via the phone numbers or email addresses listed above. Note: this is a student research project, which is being conducted as part of a Doctoral study.

What does the research involve?

The aim of the study is to understand how secondary English/EAL facilitate critical thinking about news through classroom discussion.

If it is convenient, you will be invited to participate in both an interview and focus-group discussion. If this is not convenient, you may participate in either the interview or the focus group.

In the interview, you will be invited to share and reflect on experiences of relevant discussions about news which you have had in your classroom. The interview will last no longer than 45 minutes.

The focus group will be held some time after the main interview. It will explore further questions and issues related to classroom discussions about news with other participants. The focus group will last no longer than 45 minutes.

Interviews can be conducted in person or via Zoom, while focus groups will be held via Zoom. Only audio will be recorded. Audio data will be transcribed, and de-identified data from transcripts will be used for research purposes and presentation in publications and conferences.

Why were you invited for this research?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are secondary English/EAL teacher in Australia.

You have either shared your own contact details or your details have been shared with the research team with your permission.

Consenting to participate in the project and withdrawing from the research

In order to participate in the study, you will need to sign and return a consent form which will be communicated to you. You can return the consent form in person or via email.

You have the right to withdraw at any point, and your data will not be stored or used in any way. If you withdraw your consent after data has been gathered, any data already obtained will be able to be used within the project and its dissemination unless otherwise arranged.

Possible benefits and risks to participants

The insights gleaned from this project will enrich how teachers facilitate critical thinking about news media. This in turn will benefit both students and teachers, as well as the communities they are part of.

It is not anticipated that your participation will result in any level of inconvenience or discomfort. To avoid the potential risk of you or your students being identified, all names will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Payment

No payment will be provided for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Your details and data will be managed and protected to ensure confidentiality. Transcriptions will be generated confidentially and all attempts will be made to store recordings and transcriptions securely.

The data you provide may be used for various research purposes. These include sections of a thesis, conference presentations, as well as academic journal articles, book chapters and other forms of relevant public-facing communication of research.

When used for these research purposes, your details will be de-identified, and pseudonyms will be used.

Storage of data

Your data will be stored securely on Monash computers or drives and will be kept for a minimum of 5 years after completion of the project. The data (both hard and electronic copies) will be destroyed when it is no longer required.

Results

The results of the study will be available over the course of the coming years - 2022-2025. The data will primarily be used to form the basis of a thesis, but other research publications are envisaged as well.

Complaints

Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC):

Executive Officer
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)
Room 111, Chancellery Building D,
26 Sports Walk, Clayton Campus
Research Office
Monash University VIC 3800

Tel: +61 3 9905 2052 Email: muhrec@monash.edu Fax: +61 3 9905 3831

Thank you,



Dr Sue Wilson

Appendix 3: Consent form



CONSENT FORM

Secondary English/EAL teachers in Australia

Project ID: 32347

Project title: Engaging young people in critical discussions about news in secondary English/EAL classrooms

Chief Investigator: Dr Sue Wilson

Co-investigators: Mr Kirk Weeden, Associate Professor Graham Parr

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

I consent to the following:	Yes	No
Audio recording during interview and focus group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use of de-identified transcription data for research, publication (inc. conference presentation) purposes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The data that I provide during this research may be used by the chief investigator and co-investigators in future research projects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant _____

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix 4: Research advertisement



ATTENTION: CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Engaging young people in critical discussions about news in secondary English/EAL classrooms

***How do you discuss news with your students?
How do you facilitate critical thinking through these discussions?***

Public responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and armed conflict highlight the power of news in our lives. Young people are surrounded by all sorts of information about current events, which shapes their opinions and relationships. These stories inevitably find their way to classrooms where they can be shared and discussed.

The development of active and informed citizens is at the heart of Australian Curriculum. Teachers of English play an important role in helping students develop their ability to interpret, analyse and evaluate media texts. However, not much is known about how teachers of English in Australia develop news literacy in classrooms.

This research project aims to fill the gap in our understanding through a focus on classroom discussion. Classroom discussions can be powerful opportunities for teachers to facilitate critical thinking about news. They also provide opportunities to develop civic communication skills, which are more important than ever in a climate of political polarisation.

If you are a secondary English or EAL teacher in Australia and have an experience of a classroom discussion about news which stands out to you, we'd love to hear from you! These conversations may be planned or spontaneous, and be about issues (e.g. fake news) or particular news events.

What's involved?

- 45 min interview + 45 min focus group
- Interviews can in person, phone or via Zoom; focus groups via Zoom
- Opportunity to engage in networking and professional conversations with peers

For more information, please contact:

Kirk Weeden
kirk.weeden1@monash.edu
0434928906



Appendix 5: List of guiding questions for semi-structured interviews

Questions (guide – no need to cover all)

Culture

- Firstly, can I ask how you identify yourself culturally and whether there is anything I should be aware of in order to make this interview culturally inclusive?

Identity

- How did you come to be a teacher (i.e., story and background)?
- What about your current context?(e.g. role, type of school and school culture)?
- How do you see yourself as a teacher? Reaching back in the past, where do think this view comes from?

Classroom

- *How would you describe your classroom ethos?*
- *How do you view the role of discussion in teaching and learning?*

News

- *Moving on to news, how would you define news?*
- *How would you describe your own engagement with news? (e.g., frequency, sources, types of media)*
- *Why is teaching students about news important to you? Looking at your own history, are there any story (ies) which have shaped your view on this point?*
- *How do you teach about news in your classroom (integrated vs unit/ sorts of news)?*

Classroom experiences

- *Could you tell me about an experience of a classroom discussion about news?/ Could you tell me how you discuss news with students?*
- *What was the context?/ What is the context?*
- *What was the topic/issue/story/event? / What sorts of topics/issues/stories/events?*
- *How did the interaction unfold?/ How do these unfold? Planned or spontaneous?*
- *How did you see your role during the discussion?/ How do you see your role?*
- *What challenges did you and your students encounter? How did you manage these? / What challenges do you and your students encounter? How do you manage these?*
- *What do you think the students learnt through the interaction?/ What do you think students learn through these interactions?*
- *What impact did it have on you as a person/teacher?*

Appendix 6: Focus group prompts

Focus group question prompts

1. In our interviews, all of you shared experiences of classroom discussions about news, but we didn't have a chance to unpack what you had learnt from these. So, my question here is: what have you learnt from your own classroom experience about how to facilitate critical discussions of news with students? As part of your response, please share an experience that has shaped your practice/approach. This might be the one you shared with me or another.
2. A number of you mentioned the challenges of engaging students in critical discussions of news when the information and issues presented involve the students personally in some way. More broadly, I wonder what identity work you see happening in classroom discussions of news, and how you think teachers of English can help students effectively negotiate/construct different identities in these contexts?
3. Many of you saw opportunities and gaps in the current curriculum in relation to the topic. As a follow on from this, what changes do you think need to be made to the English/EAL curriculum in order to empower students today to successfully engage in discussions about news?

Appendix 7: Pre-coding notes on focus group data

Focus group

- Pre-COVID and post-COVID conversations
- Students reluctant to take unpopular stands on politically correct issues
- Students are more willing to enter discussions when they have the knowledge, experience and language to articulate their views.
- Discussion of charged topics can have implications for students in discussions outside of class (i.e., need to consider beyond the classroom setting)
- Student relationships outside of the classroom impact what they are willing to share and do inside the classroom
- Role-play emphasised again as a useful tool for generating ideas and opinions
- Role-play allow for safe space of hypotheticals
- Need for teachers to understand what's going on for young people
- Re-iteration of connection between issues and context
- Specific identities foregrounded in the curriculum which can disadvantage others - 'I'm not as identity rich as the other kids'
- Teachers can be worried about offending people, and this is a challenge
- Need to 'flatten' classroom hierarchies when there is a critical discussion
- Discussion needs to be valued and taught in the curriculum

Impact of COVID, political correctness, discussion outside of classroom, student relationships, role-play, news and context, student challenges, classroom hierarchies, curriculum criticisms

Appendix 8: Reflective journal entry after coding

Reflections after coding (June 2023)

- I have generated a total of 406 codes - 110 invivo (words/phrases/lines) and 296 topical codes
- There seems to be a lot about discussions of current events news stories and issues related to them and less about discussions that occur in the media literacy per se.
- There seems to be a common slippage in the discussion between news and issues. Perhaps I'll need to broaden out the question?
- I'm not sure how much why there is. Is this a question worth exploring?

Appendix 9: Data extract (interview with Francesca)

458	Francesca:	Um, I sort of put a black square up on the projector as they walked into the	33:33
459		classroom, and they were all like, 'oh, blah, blah, blah' and started talking about	
460		it...um...and what really <u>emerged</u> from that was... students – especially, so we do	
461		have, you know, some students of color in that class, but predominantly, um you	
462		know, students of anglo or European heritage there. Um, and there was a real	
463		sense of...oh, I really want to have a chat, I really want to ask questions, but I I'm	
464		<u>so afraid</u> that I might ask the wrong <u>thing</u> , um...that I might <u>say the wrong</u>	
465		<u>thing</u> . There was a real anxiety around, <u>really, genuinely</u> , and from a place of	
466		<u>goodness</u> wanting to be politically correct=	
467	Researcher:	=Mmm.	
468	Francesca:	but also wanting <u>information</u> ...ah, and so that was really helpful. I said, alright, you	
469		know, in this, in this space and again I was like, 'heaven knows like <u>take one look</u>	
470		<u>at me – I am not the expert on this issue – we are all going to learn about it</u>	
471		<u>together</u> . What questions do we <u>have</u> ? Let's brainstorm them <u>all</u> . How could we	
472		find <u>information about it</u> ? What can we do to <u>help</u> ? Then we had a chat about is it	
473		useful to, to post a black square, or is it just <u>performative</u> ? Um...and a lot of the	
474		ideas is that students had or that they built up with each other was <u>super</u>	
475		<u>productive</u> – it was really humbling. So that was a <u>really rewarding experience that</u>	
476		<u>I had that</u> ...ah, motivated me to want to keep having discussions. I'm <u>not</u>	
477		<u>pretending</u> that every discussion I've had about news has been an <u>eye opening</u>	
478		<u>Gold Star</u> , pedagogic experience. Sometimes students are like – 'yeah, well...this,	
479		now I'm good,' and then they don't really take the bait, so to speak. But that was	
480		one that stands, stands out.	
481	Researcher:	At what sort of you...you mentioned that it was difficult for them at the start.	
482		What sorts of challenges did they encounter in that – particular –	
483		the students? And you, I guess, but particularly the [students.]	
484	Francesca:	[Mmm.] I guess, um there's an	
485		idea when issues in the news don't <u>affect them</u> , or speak to groups that they're	
486		not a <u>part of</u> ... ah, I think many students aren't sure about...what...what <u>voice</u> they	
487		can have or what <u>opinions they should</u> or <u>could have</u> . Um...and yeh, there's,	

488	Researcher:	there's...I guess they don't want to be like in inverted commas, <u>cancelled</u> , by	
489		asking questions about particular things.=	
490	Francesca:	=Mmhmm.=	
491	Researcher:	=Um...so, so I think that was a concern of <u>some</u> students. And for other students	
492		they just... I guess were, were skeptical about...oh what are we, where's this	
493		conversation gonna go? So, for example, if you've got, you know, students...um,	
494		from, you know, backgrounds other than anglo-Europe, well, it's an <u>investment</u> to	
495		sort of put your experiences on the line or put your perspective in front of your	
496		peers. So, you want to kind of make sure that this is this is a safe, constructive	
497		discussion before you start launching into everything that you think or <u>how it</u>	
498		<u>affects you</u> . So, I think there's a hesitancy until you can set the <u>tone</u> of the	
499		conversation and it takes <u>really, honestly</u> , it takes a couple of brave students	
500		and...a couple of strategies...um to start it off. So to give you some <u>concrete</u>	
501		<u>examples</u> , cos I think I've been speaking theoretically for a bit there.	
502		Some strategies that I like to use to get <u>students talking</u> or to get students feeling	
503		<u>safe</u> are either – think, ink, pair, share. Did you know you know that one from your	
503		own classroom time?	
504	Researcher:	Yes, yeah, yep.	
505	Francesca:	Yeah, yeah where it's like okay, maybe this is a complicated thing...I'm going to	
506		give you time to <u>formulate your idea</u> before you're telling it to one other person,	
507		before you're telling it to the class. The, the idea of entertaining or, or expressing	
508		something that you've heard that's not necessarily <u>your own</u> , so you can hold your	
509		ideas <u>lightly</u> , or you can present an idea without sort of attaching your <u>identity to</u>	
510		<u>it</u> . Um...sometimes even I find modulating the physical space. So whether we're	
511		going to sit on the floor, we're going to go sit outside, we're all going to sit in a	
512		circle – so we don't feel like this is like a <u>lesson</u> , like a <u>classroom</u> – like it's a	
513		different type of discussion if that <u>makes sense</u> ?=	
514	Researcher:	=Mmhmm.=	
515	Francesca:	=And there's little spaces – we're kind of lucky at our school, there's little	

Appendix 10: Data extract (focus group)

159	Dimble:	Um talked about yeh, as the English language teacher, talking about the shifts in	
160		gendered language and political correctness and public language and...	
161	Polly:	Yeh, and it's interesting that you said the LGBT community kids <u>do</u> , do sort of have	
162		– get have some side sort of um <u>reason to get into a conversation</u> , don't they? It's	
163		almost like um...if you've...um been <u>driven to become</u> personally engaged in	
164		something you get you, you can hit the ground running with a student. Um...I guess	
165		that's a bit too general though, I find, I sometimes expect kids say, for example, I	
166		was thinking about the Sri Lankan crisis a few weeks ago, and I've got a few boys in	
167		my year twelve <u>class</u> , and I was trying to make <u>parallels</u> with um...ah...The Giver	
168		and it was a bit of an outside the box conversation. But um they <u>didn't really</u> have	
169		much of a background knowledge about it, and I <u>couldn't go anywhere</u> unless I ran	
170		the conversation, you know, and I and <u>I don't want to do that</u> . So sometimes it's,	
171		it's, it surprises me <u>how little</u> older kids have their ear to the <u>ground</u> ...I think I've	
172		just said in a very long, round-about way.	
173	Francesca:	Can I throw something out there to build off what both you Polly and Dimble have	
174		said? So I, I completely agree in terms of conversation instinctively stops at a	
175		certain point of people go <u>yes</u> , [we should change.]	
176	Polly:	[Yes, yeh, yeh.]	
177	Francesca:	Um, the first sort of <u>news event</u> that I vividly remember discussing with um my	
178		classes, cos I haven't been teaching that long – this is my fourth year. Um and one	
179		of the first big discussions I remember having was about the <u>black squares</u> that	
180		everybody was posting to Instagram. Do you remember?= =Yeh.=	
181	Polly:		
182	Francesca:	And sort a crescendo of Black Lives Matter and after the George Floyd and that	
183		was really <u>ricocheting around</u> , and like we were locked down and then back for a	
184		week. Um, and I... remember so I posted a picture of it <u>on the board</u> , and I said just	
185		an anonymous poll so you can use your phone and your computer, 'who would like	
186		to <u>scrap this lesson on Jane Eyre</u> for the day and (inaudible) should...what's on the	
187		board instead?' A <u>hundred percent of students</u> said <u>yes</u> , I wanna talk about	

188		black square.=	
189	Polly:	=Mmm.	
190	Francesca:	Um, I just wanted to <u>gauge</u> it. I didn't want to launch in, especially cos you know	
191		there are some students like people or students of color in my class as well. <u>But</u> ,	
192		for me it wasn't so much <u>apathy</u> that I was picking up on in that class in terms of –	15:00
193		<u>yes, it's terrible, it's bad</u> . It was a real <u>fear</u> that I thought of students=	
194	Polly:	=Mmm.=	
195	Francesca:	=being <u>paranoid</u> to say the wrong thing.=	
196	Polly:	=Yeh.=	
197	Francesca:	=for lack of a better word it, <u>cancelled</u> , by	
198	Polly:	=Yeh yeh, yeh. I agree.	
199	Francesca:	That's what I <u>thought</u> , really (inaudible).	
200	Polly:	Yeh, and I <u>know</u> that this year more than any we feel that our kids are sort of um	
201		dividing, you know, there's lots of you know, your <u>classic disgruntled</u> um...	
202		<u>complaining</u> going on between, you know, groups of kids in year twelve. But we	
203		<u>know</u> that they're doing a lot of discussion as always on <u>social media</u> , and I think	
204		there's that fear that you're going to be talked about <u>in all directions</u> , and that sort	
205		of as a real suffocating...um... <u>presence</u> in the classroom I feel. It sort of holds	
206		people <u>back</u> a lot.	
207	Researcher:	Polly, that's a really – can, I can I can expand on that cos I thought that was really	
208		interesting. I think you or another participant picked up on that that the	
209		conversation continues outside the class[room].	
210	Polly:	[Ah yeh, yeh, yeh.]	

Appendix 11: Data extract (written response from Adam)

3. Many of you saw opportunities and gaps in the current curriculum in relation to the topic. As a follow on from this, what changes do you think need to be made to the English/EAL curriculum in order to empower students today to successfully engage in discussions about news?

I think there needs to be more explicit discussion of news in English classes more generally. Teachers need professional learning in using texts and sources of news that young people are actually engaging with to get their news – like social media, specifically apps like Tik Tok. Teachers need to increase their social media literacy to gain a better understanding of how young people consume news. Letters to the editor/opinion pieces in newspapers are not necessarily the most relevant text types for students to be engaging with in the classroom because they're not relevant to their lived experiences.

There is currently an emphasis on analysing argument, which is challenging for EAL students. While there is a place for this, there may also be a place for interrogating the ideas and biases presented in news sources more specifically, rather than just focusing on how writers use language to persuade audiences.

As mentioned above, the IBDP English B curriculum, which is a language acquisition subject (I'm not as familiar with the first language English subjects in IB), allows students to engage with ideas and perspectives more deeply because the curriculum is structured around broad themes and topics are covered such as 'human rights', '21st century skills', 'global citizenship', 'human ingenuity' and many more. Students engage with a range of short texts to explore these topics. The topics explored enable students to develop deep understandings of ideologies, values, perspectives, ideas, concepts that give them the language and conceptual understanding to be able to discuss news in a more sophisticated way. I think knowledge is power and there is no guidance on the types of content/ideas that students need to be able to become news literate in current English/EAL curricula. The IB curriculum, in contrast, is centred around ideas and building knowledge and curiosity – there is also more scope to engage in class discussions (one of the assessment tasks is an oral presentation where students are asked questions about the topics we cover – we do a lot of class discussion to prepare for this task and news discussions actually help build the skills they need for this task – this is a key difference with the VCE curriculum where news discussions do not feed into any particular assessment task and time is so limited in VCE that this would be seen as an indulgence.)