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Teacher agency in the selection of literary texts

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ABSTRACT

The nature of English as a school subject – and particularly English literature – is a longstanding issue of debate for practitioners and researchers internationally. One dimension of this concerns the forces that shape the diet of literary texts that students are fed. In this study, we draw on the ecological model of agency to interrogate the factors which influence how teachers choose literary texts for whole class teaching. Dimensions of agency are used as lenses to reveal the complex ways in which values and beliefs, structures of authority, material resources, and identities shape the selection of books, plays and poetry that are taught in English. By looking across these dimensions, we identify important questions which contribute to the debate: who should have agency to choose the texts taught; how does teacher agency influence students' experiences of English literature; how far should we expect these experiences to be standardised?

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Introduction

Debate about the nature and purpose of English as a school discipline is traceable over more than a hundred years – to *The Teaching of English in England*, commonly known as the "Newbolt Report" (Newbolt 1921), and further back to Matthew Arnold's advocacy of a cultural education for all in the late 19th century (Smith 2019; Perry 2019). Currently, in response to the "knowledge turn" in UK government education policy (Elliott 2021), debate is particularly concerned with characterising *knowledge* in English, and the implications of this for curriculum, pedagogy, standardisation and accountability. Framed by the recent centenary of Newbolt and 50th anniversary of the influential Dartmouth seminar, writers in the UK including Goodwyn et al. (2018), Bleiman (2020), Elliott (2021) and Jacobs (2021) reflect a pervasive interest in subject discipline, subject knowledge and subject identities, with similar debates occurring elsewhere – notably Australia (Doecke 2017; Macken-Horarik 2011) and the US (Zancanella, Franzak, and Sheahan 2016). With regards to the teaching of literature, Eaglestone argues urgently that "there is a mismatch between new methods of learning, new curricula and the subject itself" (Eaglestone 2021, 8). Internationally, Yates et al. argue that "the study of literature has been viewed,

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historically, as a key component of subject English in Anglophone countries" (Yates et al. 2019, 52); however, the rationale for studying literature has always been disputed, and "the question remains fundamental to the discipline" (Dodou 2020, 257).

Such debates seem critical now, particularly given the growth of standardised curricula in some UK chains of affiliated schools (known as Multi-Academy Trusts, or MATs) (Greany 2018). The most recent iteration of the National Curriculum in England was purportedly underpinned by a rationale emphasising "autonomy" for schools. The white paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, called the approach "supported autonomy to drive up standards for all" (DfE 2016, p.8), and variations on the word "autonomy" or "autonomous" appear 42 times. However, this "autonomy" is qualified by the promise of "fair, stretching accountability measures" (ibid), raising the familiar spectre of performativity (Ball 2003), and the tension between centralised, competitive accountability regimes and the idea that teachers should be able to exercise control over what and how they teach.

To contribute to the conversation about the nature of school English, how it should be defined, and who should define it, we offer a small-scale exploration of how teachers choose literary texts to teach at Key Stage 3. This is typically the start of the secondary phase of schooling in the UK (ages 11–14, school years 7, 8 and 9). We focus particularly on texts which are studied by the whole class – including novels, plays and poetry – but note where participants situated their choices within students' wider experience of literature in school. This area of the curriculum ostensibly offers significant opportunity for autonomy; with no specified texts or authors other than Shakespeare (DfE 2013) it appears to provide space for teacher choice, and thus presents the opportunity to look closely at what might influence or inhibit those choices. Autonomy, as freedom to choose, carries an implication of agency, that is, teachers' capacity to make decisions and take actions relating to the curriculum offered to students. "Agency" as a theoretical concept allows us to investigate what determines these decisions from a multifaceted perspective.

Agency

"Teacher agency" – a professional ability to "make free or independent choices" (Campbell 2012, 183) – is an increasing topic of interest, often positioned in counterpoint to accountability (ibid; Sloan 2006; Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust 2015). Historically, agency has been subject to different theoretical framings, with the emphasis variously on agency as a personal characteristic, as an interaction between personal autonomy and structural constraints, or as mediated by contexts and cultural tools (Leijen et al 2020). Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) have offered a model of agency which attempts to bridge some of these dimensions, presenting an "ecological" perspective of agency as situational and environmentally dependent. This understands agency not as inherent within an individual, but rather emergent in action as the "interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors" (Biesta and Tedder 2006, 137); it "is not something that people can *have* – as a property, capacity or competence – but is something that people *do"* (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015, 626). The concept is closely related to identity: Sloan (2006) reflects that teachers' capacity to be agentic is related to the extent to which they identify with the values of and role assigned to them in their school context, and Toom et al (2021) emphasise the understanding that agency is not just related to the characteristics of an individual, but also to "reciprocal relationships with

others" Toom et al. (2021 p.324). In our desire to understand what determines which texts get taught at Key Stage 3, we chose to use Biesta et al.'s multifaceted model of agency as an organising framework for exploration and comparison across the different personal perspectives presented to us by our participants.

Our research

Participants were an opportunity sample, drawn from those who volunteered after responding to a survey about KS3 text choice as part of a project funded by The United Kingdom Literacy Association (see Kneen et al. 2022 for a discussion of the survey results). This second phase involved 9 teachers in comprehensive secondary schools. For pragmatic reasons, participants were based in Wales and the south west of England, and in most cases were known to the research team through our professional networks. Ethical approval was granted by The University of Cardiff, in line with the BERA guidelines (British Educational Research Association 2018); project information was shared in writing and discussed before data collection, and written informed consent gained. There is a degree of homogeneity in both research team and sample – especially gender (female) and ethnicity (white). Furthermore, participants had a similar number of years in teaching, ranging from 4 to 9, and most held departmental leadership roles (see Table 1). The non-representative sample nevertheless allows us to identify some of the numerous ways teachers made choices, to identify constraints, and to consider the roles of values and beliefs in decision-making. The findings therefore offer idiographic insights into some of the varied ways teachers exercise agency, rather than an exhaustive or representative analysis (Karson 2007), and may shed light on larger debates and professional dilemmas.

We interviewed each volunteer in their school, using a semi-structured schedule which elicited information about the texts they teach across years 7, 8 and 9 (ages 11–14). Where possible, participants provided researchers with a "tour" of their school's stock of class reading texts first, to establish rapport and frame the formal interview. In the audio recorded interview, participants discussed *who* chose texts studied in class, *how* choices were made and *why* texts were chosen. Teachers were asked to bring an example of a novel, poem and play taught at Key Stage 3, so that general discussion could be complemented by more focused, detailed discussion of a sample of particular choices. While the questions focused on structured whole class teaching, participants often situated their responses in the context of wider opportunities for reading across the school – including reference to library provision, independent reading, and whole school reading initiatives.

Table 1. Participant information.

Position within the school	Number of Years teaching
Initial Teacher Education Coordinator	6
Head of Department (English)	5
KS3 English Lead	4
Second in Department, Head of KS4 English	8
Assistant Curriculum Leader (English)	7
Teacher of English and PGCE Student Mentor	5
Head of Department (English)	*Not known*
Teacher of English and PGCE Student Mentor	9
Head of Department (English)	*Not known*

Table 2. *Dimensions of agency (adapted from* biesta, priestley, and robinson 2015).

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Description
Practical-Evaluative	Cultural	Ideas, values, beliefs, discourses, language
	Structural	Social structures: relationships, roles, power, trust
	Material	Resources, Physical environment
Iterational	Life histories	Influence of past experiences, habitual patterns and routines
	Professional Histories	
Projective	Short term	Imagined futures, hopes, fears, desires
	Long term	

Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) model of agency provided lenses to view the data, allowing us to explore different dimensions while also considering their inter-relationships. The theoretical framework helped us to step outside our immediate intuitive response as teachers and researchers to explore the data from different perspectives, as well as offering the opportunity to interrogate the application of the model itself.

Recordings were transcribed and imported into the NVIVO 12 coding platform for analysis. Thematic coding proceeded iteratively, one researcher undertaking the analysis and two others acting as critical friends to check and challenge the decisions made. We present the data from a critical realist position, seeking to construct a useful interpretation of participants' experiences which can contribute to wider discourse about teacher agency and the teaching of literature in school, while acknowledging the subjectivity of such construction (Terry et al. 2017).

An initial deductive coding process categorised relevant comments according to dimensions and sub-dimensions of agency, allowing comments to be coded to more than one where necessary (see Table 2). Within the sub-dimensions, inductive coding was used to generate categories which are presented in the findings tables below. The application of lenses was not straightforward, as we discuss in the conclusion: the recurrence of identity as an alternative organising concept is one example of this. Nevertheless, in our attempt to dissect and organise the data (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014), we believe that the lenses offer meaningful perspectives which illuminate different experiences of agency and determiners of text choice.

The following sections present the study's findings discursively, drawing together quotations from participants, analysis and existing research in order to answer the research question, "How do teachers exercise agency in the selection of Key Stage 3 literary texts?"

The iterational and projective lenses: "it's a book for teenagers, but I loved it"

The iterational and projective lenses allowed us to consider how teachers drew on past experiences and imagined "future trajectories" (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015, 627) when discussing text choices. Through this lens, we saw participants frequently referring to their personal and professional identities as readers, teachers and parents (see Table 3), and the impact of the personal on the professional in their choice of texts. As Buchanan notes, "agency and identity are intertwined" (Buchanan 2015, 705), and this could be seen in how teachers foregrounded their personal reading histories and preferences when discussing what motivated their decisions.

There was a striking *overlap between personal and professional* identities, recalling Goodwyn's finding that "Literature remains central to [English teachers'] teaching and their personal and professional identity" (Goodwyn 2012, 219). Six teachers were effusive about reading young adult fiction and discussed its impact on their teaching in terms which resonate strongly with Cremin et al.'s concept of the "reading teacher" (Cremin et al. 2009). These participants read for pleasure ("it's something I really enjoy") and this also yields professional insights: the ability "to understand what [students] know, and the way that they are interpreting things" (see also Brooks 2007). Some teachers referred to experiences of reading *as a child*, and others mentioned their experiences *as a parent*. Such comments explicitly blurred personal and professional roles and identities, as can be seen in the segue from "reader" to "teacher" in this rationale for teaching *Private Peaceful*:

Table 3. Personal and professional histories and projective factors.

Code	Example	Number of individual teachers	Number of total comments
As an Adult Reader	" I read a lot and I read things that I think I want to use"	8	15
As a Child Reader	"I'd love to teach The Wind Singer just because I absolutely loved it . . . when I was probably in Year 6, Year 7"	3	4
As a Parent	"my daughter is Year 6 and is such a reader and so with my dad, my daughter and me, we have quite a book group going which is wonderful"	3	4
Overlap between Personal and Professional	"we do read and we do share, so we'll bring books in that we've either loved or loathed and it's the conversation about it and I think it's really reinvigorated us over the last couple of years"	8	20
Student Responses	"it's lovely to hear children saying, "Oh I really enjoyed reading The Great Gatsby"	7	20
Projective	"It is an area that we're looking to develop next year"	7	22

Table 4. Cultural factors.

Code	Example	Number of individual teachers	Number of total comments
Opportunities	"there are a lot of ethical issues in it that really would spark a lot of discussion"	9	46
Enjoyment	"For me, it's more about a love of literature, a love of reading"	8	57
Engagement	"they would be able to relate to it and I thought it would really get them thinking"	8	16
Challenge	"there's a sort of sense that it needs to be quite literary and it needs to be quite rigorous"	7	16
Personal Growth	"broaden their understanding of what the role of literature is in their own lives and reflect the issues they see around them"	7	14
Diversity	"we're trying to get books which . . . cover a range of perspectives, people from different cultures"	5	10
Teacher Interests	"if there are people in the department that love a particular text and we know that they're gonna be great at teaching it and therefore their passion's gonna come through that teaching"	5	6
Cultural Capital	"we're having a real drive with cultural capital based on the new OFSTED framework"	3	5
The Canon	"we hook the new knowledge of the traditional canon on to their existing knowledge"	2	2

I chose to do it originally because I'd read it before and I'd really enjoyed it as a child and now I carry on choosing it every year because I've noticed that even the most reluctant of readers have engaged with the characters within it, have grown to love the characters.

This resonates strongly with Doecke & Mead's study of the role that literary knowledge plays "in the making of English teachers" (Doecke and Mead 2018, 250), where knowledge is created not just within confines of formal academic study, but in "non-institutional, non-disciplinary contexts" (p.251) including the home. Participants who described a positive relationship between personal and professional reading saw their own enjoyment as an important reason for choosing texts, and described the knowledge of suitable texts developed through private reading as enhancing their agency (see also Collins and Safford 2008).

However, the reciprocity between personal and professional life was not always positive. One teacher described how she had become "different as a reader, since I've become a teacher and . . . it's ruined it for me a bit", explaining that she now reads "with a highlighter in hand", unable to switch off her teacher-orientation to texts and read for pleasure. Another commented that she has "no time" to read young adult fiction. This finding that there may be harmony or dissonance between teachers' experiences of reading for pleasure and reading "as a teacher" might imply different orientations to literary knowledge – whether academic reading is seen as fundamentally different to "other" reading.

Teachers spoke less about *projected* futures, tending to discuss the short term – looking ahead to the next academic year. Indeed, it is noteworthy that teachers did not look further ahead – perhaps because they were wary about how the goalposts might move should there be further changes to the national curriculum or accountability frameworks. However, these comments demonstrated the participants' commitment to ongoing improvement, such as the idealistic pragmatism behind their exercise of agency in "trialling a reading programme".

The cultural lens: "it's a balance"

The next lens focuses more precisely on individual values and beliefs. There is a longstanding body of research indicating the importance of values in shaping teacher knowledge and behaviour (e.g. Gudmundsdottir 1990), which was borne out when teachers explained the rationale for their text choices. The codes in Table 4 indicate a range of interrelated and sometimes competing values; every participant was balancing varied aims and priorities when selecting texts. The emphasis in this theme is on the views of the participants, rather than on wider school values (which are discussed in the "Structural" theme).

A prevalent value was a desire to engender *enjoyment* of reading. Variations of "love/loving" appeared 25 times in the context of student enjoyment of reading (and numerous times when teachers reflected on books they "loved" or experiences which have been "lovely"). These terms echo Goodwyn's finding that beginning teachers typically foreground a "love of reading" when discussing their motivation (Goodwyn 2012, 219) and Stimpson's concept of the paracanon of "beloved" texts (Stimpson 1990, 958). Teachers wanted to engender "enthusiasm" as an individual and a social experience: "where do we sit and enjoy a story together?" The *engagement* and *opportunities* codes

capture explanations about specific text choices. *Engagement* signals where teachers selected texts because they would be relatable, accessible or engaging, recalling the distinction made by Mason and Giovanelli between "authentic" and "manufactured" reading opportunities (Mason and Giovanelli 2021). This was often presented as a rationale for including contemporary choices in addition to "classical texts". More pragmatically, all teachers looked for the varied teaching *opportunities* afforded by texts – including cross-curricular themes, "life lessons", opportunities to develop "literacy skills" and to introduce concepts (e.g. genre conventions) that would prepare students for future phases of the curriculum.

Another discourse is apparent in the parallel focus on *challenge*. Variations of "challenge/challenging" appeared 16 times, and terms such as "rigorous", "intellectual", "stretching", "advanced", "pushing" were used by most participants. Challenge was perceived in various ways: it might be linked to linguistic demands, or to novelty, to thematic sophistication or to "the classics". Specific texts perceived as appropriately "challenging" tended to be traditionally canonical, and often had previously appeared as set texts for external examinations undertaken by older students (e.g. *Animal Farm; A Christmas Carol*).

There was also a strong discourse linking literature to *personal growth* (see Goodwyn 2016), a model of English which has been prevalent since Dixon's report on the Dartmouth Seminar (Dixon 1967, see also Perry 2019). Seven participants asserted the value of literature for learning "about humanity", "how we can find our place in the world", "broadening viewpoint" and "firing the imagination". Text choices associated with these comments tended to be more modern and specifically targeted at young adults (such as Mitch Johnson's *Kick*, Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*), although there were some exceptions (e.g. Blake's *London*).

Teachers also emphasised the value of considering diversity of representation of authors and characters (5 teachers), and teachers' own interests and preferences (5 teachers). A minority of participants also discussed how *cultural capital* and *the canon* influenced their text choices. Interestingly, counter to the dominance of canonical literature in political discourse about education, social mobility and entitlement (Coles 2013) only one participant appeared to align cultural capital with traditional canonical texts; the other two teachers linked it to diversity and to knowledge of contemporary issues.

The structural lens: "intellectual ownership" vs "we have to do what everyone else is doing"

Concerns about the impact of performativity on teachers' ability to act in accordance with their values and beliefs are longstanding; for Ball, a culture of performativity has led to a view that beliefs "are no longer important – it is output that counts" (2003, 223). This lens, summarised in Table 5, focuses on how structures of authority and accountability influence text choice. All participants were part of a nested hierarchy: they were teachers within an English Department or Faculty sitting within a larger school structure; some were part of a chain of affiliated schools known as a Multi-Academy Trust.

Every participant discussed the extent to which individual teachers had *autonomy* over text choice. All stated a need for some standardisation of teaching across classes within the same year group; however, the range of difference was remarkable. At one end of the

Table 5. Structural factors.

Code	Example	Number of individual teachers	Number of total comments
Teacher Autonomy	“flexibility for staff to pick texts that they really enjoy”	9	64
Structural Support	“It’s definitely the department together, we are really collaborative”	9	82
Structural Pressures	“everybody understands that the tail is wagging the dog to a certain extent with preparing them for the GCSE”	9	37
Student Voice	“Lots of input from the students, you know, what books do you like?”	5	6
The MAT	“there are some things that I’ve just had to accept to a certain extent “	1	14

spectrum, a department gave teachers freedom to teach any text "from the cupboard", with standardisation only through shared assessment objectives; on the other, a multi-academy trust was planning to specify texts across KS3, create standard schemes of work, and dictate the sequence and timing of schemes across all trust schools.

In most schools, the decision about which texts to teach was taken at departmental level, with Heads of Department or Faculty holding ultimate authority. Departments commonly designated texts to year groups but then allowed teachers to "choose" from available resources. Departments were seen as the key site of *structural support*: all participants valued departmental collaboration and sharing of knowledge about books, the "social practice" of teaching (Wescott 2021, 121). They described the text-selection process as collective decision-making, suggesting that their personal values aligned with those of their wider department; indeed, the values explored through the cultural lens were often presented in the plural as representations of departmental philosophy: "we think" or "we believe". We should note, however, that our interviewees tended to be departmental leaders; we may have had different results with, for example, early career teachers.

Structural pressures constraining participant agency tended to be external. Preparation for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (*GCSE*) – national external examinations taken by most students at the age of 15-16 – dominated this code, with 7 teachers explaining that "the end point" of the GCSE assessment exerts a washback effect on decisions at Key Stage 3, recalling "the tyranny of the test" that was recognised in the Newbolt report 100 years ago (Smith 2019, 265). Accountability to external bodies was rarely explicitly mentioned, although language that could be associated with the education inspection framework of the current schools inspectorate in England (the Office for Standards in Education) – including "cultural capital", "sequencing" – did occur when teachers discussed their decisions.

The rationales offered for the degree of freedom given to teachers tended to foreground either flexibility or consistency – signalling the interwoven nature of cultural and structural dimensions, with values exerting influence on structural organisation. Schools with the most teacher autonomy prioritised "flexibility", both in terms of choosing texts to motivate and engage students (and teachers), and in tailoring teaching to student needs. Where expectations were more standardised, "consistency" tended to be prioritised. Sometimes this was positioned as pragmatic (e.g. to allow students to transfer between classes). However, one participant's response signalled a more complex interplay of managerial expectations and an assumption that dictating lesson plans would result in all students having "the same experience" – and that this should be a goal:

> *I think some of the senior leaders and other school models have a way of working where you're supposed to go in to every classroom and see different stages of the same lesson and it has been streamlined and they were saying it's only fair that students, regardless of who they're with, should get the same experience of English and some shouldn't get a better experience than others.*

Trying to standardise English teaching in this way echoes concerns about what "doing English" looks like in schools (Eaglestone 2021; Yates et al. 2019). Such desire for standardisation can be driven by managerial anxiety about quality assurance, and the unintended consequences of this can be severe: "It is not that performativity gets in the way of "real"

academic work or "proper" learning," notes Ball; rather "it is a vehicle for changing what academic work and learning are!" (2003, 226). For Wescott, this can "have a profound impact on teaching practice and teacher identities" (Wescott 2021, 121).

Most participants did not explicitly discuss this tension between standardisation and individual values. However, this section's final code – *The MAT* – captures the comments of a Head of Department who was confronting significant loss of agency. At the time of the interview, she had recently finished teaching *Kick* by Mitch Johnson, with extremely positive student feedback. The book was chosen to engage a specific class and included an inspiring author visit. However, the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) to which her school belonged was designing a fixed curriculum. This would standardise text choices, learning objectives, sequences of teaching (on a repeating 12 week cycle), and, potentially, individual lessons. She presented the rationale for the change: "it's about a consistency of content". However, she also expressed numerous concerns: whether a standardised curriculum would work in all schools, whether it will "teach them to love literature" and whether standardised content is the best way to ensure quality teaching when "somebody who's not a particularly strong or conscientious teacher is probably just gonna open up those PowerPoints and teach them". Her reaction was mostly fatalistic – "there's a wall and it's there" – but there was a glimmer of agency (and an indication of the strength of her values) in her determination to keep "making sure that those moral questions have been answered".

Interestingly, references to student input into reading choices were scarce. Teachers indicated that students might have input into books bought for the library or independent reading, but only two participants reported students choosing whole class set texts.

Material: "what's in the cupboard"

Text choice was also constrained by access to material resources (see Table 6).

All participants indicated that *financial resources* constrain their ability to introduce new texts. Generally there is not a separate budget for buying books, so careful decisions must be made and buying new texts can be a "bit of a gamble". Consequently, teachers discussed using photocopied booklets, adding "a new poem" rather than a new novel, selecting editions of texts primarily on the basis of cost or organising fund-raising specifically for new texts. Most indicated that they could purchase new sets of books occasionally, "if we put in a good enough argument for them". Most feel reasonably well-resourced, though this was not universal. Teachers explained that their choices were, to some extent, driven by "what's in the cupboard": "our stock dictates our teaching more than the other way around". In terms of teacher agency, this is important: whilst teachers were keen to share texts in accordance with their own values, beliefs, and enjoyment, this was constrained by finances.

When teachers situated their discussion of choices in the context of wider school reading opportunities, *libraries and librarians* were frequently mentioned as crucial resources, though, again, they were not universally available. Librarians provided knowledge of young adult literature to support time-poor teachers, offering ideas for new set texts, and could expand reading beyond the classroom.

Table 6. Material factors.

Code	Example	Number of individual teachers	Number of total comments
Financial Resources	"if there's money left at the end of the year for a class set to be bought of texts, then we'll buy it"	9	46
Library and Librarians	"And if a kid needs a recommendation I'll send her to the librarian. But she has a much better understanding of what's popular and what's good than we do in the department"	8	20
Time	"the volume of what we've had to get through, essentially the teaching to test that we've had to do for a very, very long time, those reading lessons in the library just don't exist anymore"	5	10

However, whilst participants asserted the importance of librarians and the library, material constraints were at odds with this. Pressures of limited *time* were noted by just over half of participants; two noted insufficient time for "library lessons", and others commented more generally that a squeezed curriculum limits their ability to teach full/long texts. If we recall Yandell's contention that "learning and development happen in and through the interactions that constitute the experience of schooling" (Yandell 2020, 263), we might infer that some teachers and students are missing out on the potentially important interactions that might engender a sense of agency and an enjoyment of reading and literature (Merga 2020).

Conclusion

The lenses provided by Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) allowed us to explore multifaceted ways in which teacher agency occurs in interaction between teachers and contexts. The practical-evaluative theme, with lenses focused on values, structures and material contexts, helped us tease out the way in which personal beliefs, structures of leadership and authority, and access to material resources shape teachers' selection of texts. Conversely, the iterational theme has highlighted how intrinsically combined personal and professional identities are in teachers' orientations to literature. However, we recognise that presenting the results through these separate themes may occlude how the factors are interwoven; for example, we have focused on teachers' values and beliefs through the cultural lens, but these interplay with institutional values examined in the structural lens. Similarly, we have positioned the re-use of texts and materials as a facet of the material dimension, but this could also be viewed through the iterational lens as features of routine and habit. Identity emerges as an alternative cross-lens theme, recalling Buchanan's suggestion that agency can be understood as identity "in motion" (Buchanan 2015, 714), and Toom et al.'s argument that agency is shaped by relationships (Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust 2015). This was particularly evident in participants' tendency to express collective rather than individual values, speaking as "the department" and using "we" rather than "I" throughout, reinforcing Sloan's argument that identification with collective values of the school and the role to which they are assigned is fundamental to teachers' ability to exercise agency (Sloan 2006). This also suggests that it would be useful to explore further how the model, as we used it, might be adapted in future to shift the focus from individual to "collective agency" as it applies to collaborative decision making within departments (Pantić and Florian 2015). We therefore look holistically across these lenses to present the following questions as key issues arising from our research.

Whose values should drive the selection of texts? Despite Ball's claim that performative agendas have driven out "beliefs", teachers' values were clearly an important determiner of text choices, and such values were complex and multifaceted. "The department" was the primary site of negotiation, but we also saw a movement towards higher authorities ("senior leaders" or "MAT") dictating decisions. It is also notable that the values that teachers expressed were often non-testable and non-assessed: the desire to broaden horizons, develop understanding of the world, engender a love of reading. We saw this repeated in the iterative category, where teachers' personal and professional reading identities were intertwined. This reflects wider tensions between values, identity and accountability or performance measures in teaching: the concerns that what teachers

do "will not be captured or valued within the metrics of accountability" (Ball 2003 p.223). We saw teachers navigating an extraordinarily complex array of values and constraints, and sometimes – though by no means always – struggling to make choices aligned to their beliefs.

To what extent should students have "the same experience of English"? Looking across structural and cultural dimensions, we can perceive an inherent tension between the concept of standardising the "experience" of English and the dominant value expressed by teachers: to promote a "love" of reading. If authentic interactions with texts are inherently personal and interpretive, the concept that students across a school or MAT can have "the same" experience of literary study is innately flawed. As Yandell notes, classrooms "are extraordinarily complex, unpredictable and exciting places . . . places where what is learnt is not reducible to what is taught, and still less to what a teacher (or some other designer of curricula) intended to be taught" (Yandell 2020, 263). If knowledge in the study of literature is fundamentally "knowing how" rather than "knowing that" involving deliberation and judgment (Eaglestone 2021, 11), if it involves interpretive rather than propositional knowledge (Doecke and Mead 2018), and blurs personal and professional or academic identities, one might argue that aiming for "the same" experience is incompatible with literary study. Yet the idea that some standardisation should exist was persistent across our participants, and a shared or collective departmental culture was valued. This raises questions about both sharing and standardisation, particularly with regards to how shared values might underpin collective agency within a department, how such collective agency might be fostered, as well as which elements of the reading experience can or should be standardised or shared.

How do teachers' agentic experiences affect students' experience of literature in school? Debates about the school canon have been rife for decades (e.g. Applebee 1992; Smith 2019). Experiences of agency matter not just for teachers' professional identities and satisfaction, but also have a direct impact on how students experience literature, not just in terms of whether the selection of texts is narrow or enriching, but also in terms of the enthusiasm that teachers might bring to the classroom. We might compare the schools in our small sample where a teacher's "passion" is a driving factor in the selection of texts to those where standardisation is prioritised. We have not examined what this means for students, but future research might usefully explore that relationship.

Reflection

We would like to finish by reflecting on how this research challenged our assumptions and offered an evolving understanding of agency in relation to our specific focus on text choices. Our conclusions are questions partly because our data revealed issues and tensions rather than straightforward answers, but also to reflect the fact that agency is dynamic. Conversations across the research team as the project progressed supported reflection on our own developing understandings, and the theoretical lenses challenged our assumptions. Our initial views of teacher agency focused mainly on the structural and material elements: whether teachers were "allowed" to choose texts and had the physical resources to do so. However, the model of agency we adopted highlighted the importance of values, reader identities, and particularly interpersonal elements. When

considering values, we were surprised by the emphasis on collective agency, how often participants expressed their views in the first-person plural; in considering identity, the blurring of or (conversely) tension between personal and professional identities was striking; in terms of structure, the fact that we found such a range of different expectations of standardisation despite the small sample surprised us. Finally, we must ask what this study is missing. As noted earlier, we are very aware that our sample is small and, in some respects, homogenous, and that there are myriad experiences and voices not represented. It would undoubtedly be beneficial to work longer term with participants to explore how their agency refigures in response to different circumstances, and to gather their responses to our interpretations in order to yield deeper understandings of how their agency manifests in action. Nonetheless, we believe that this study has raised useful questions and examples to contribute to the debate about the diet of literary texts taught at Key Stage 3: questions which we suggest might usefully be explored within English departments and by curriculum leaders in and across schools. The study has found evidence that in many schools, values and beliefs have not been subsumed in pursuit of accountability, and that teachers are managing to enact the agency that is "an indispensable element of good and meaningful education" (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015 abstract).

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