



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curraim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Prescribing Texts

Report on the role of prescribed text lists in Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate English and the processes involved in text selection

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Introduction

Literature plays many roles across the spectrum of education. From early childhood, literature provides children with the means to understand the world around them, discover the fundamentals of language, expand imagination and develop empathy for others. As young people's language and literacy skills develop further through their primary and post-primary education, literature fulfils other functions. In the English language classroom, literature provides the means to explore themes and issues, introduces students to varied cultural and social history and provides exemplars of writing. Literature in the second language classroom can provide social and cultural exploration and exemplars of writing while also building proficiency. However, the word 'literature' is value laden. For many, it creates an expectation of literary works of art, imbued with longevity and cultural importance and therefore with high cultural capital. For this reason, the specification and syllabus for English at junior cycle and Leaving Certificate use the broader term 'texts' to include literary and non-literary texts that students will encounter, explore and model in their experience in the English classroom. This may include novels, novellas, poetry, prose, drama, written verse, spoken word, graphic novels, travelogues, blogs, film, biopics, biographies, essays, articles, podcasts and more.

Central to the aims of the English specification at junior cycle is the aim to develop students' knowledge of language and literature. It encourages the development of "an informed appreciation of literature through personal encounters with a variety of literary texts" (NCCA and Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p.5). In the Leaving Certificate syllabus, one of the aims is for the students to engage "with the voice of literature, learn to dialogue critically with it, and so come to understand its significance and value" (Department of Education and Science, 1998, p.2). To facilitate this engagement with a wide variety of texts both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate English have lists of prescribed texts from which teachers, (sometimes with their students), choose the texts they will explore in class. This report emerges from a particular context. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, the prescribed lists for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate English came under increasing scrutiny for diversity and representation. Traditional texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Of Mice and Men* were widely questioned in the media for their

representation of race. In 2021, a different social media campaign questioned the morality and suitability of certain texts on the prescribed lists. The culmination of these events resulted in NCCA commissioning research on the role and purpose of prescribed text lists in other jurisdictions by Dr Bethan Marshall, King's College, London. The findings of that research are published at <https://ncca.ie/en/resources/comparative-study-of-literature-in-english-curricula-across-jurisdictions/>

The aim of this report is to examine the role, purposes and processes of text selection used in Ireland in light of Marshall's research (2022) and, to explore the voices and varying perspectives on text lists as communicated to the NCCA. Similar perspectives have been shared with the Department of Education. Marshall's research provides a detailed examination of the teaching of English across eight jurisdictions and the role of prescribed lists within these curricula. This report gives an overview of how the process for text selection has evolved in Ireland. In addition, it takes the findings from Marshall's research and compares the processes currently used in Ireland with those used internationally in order to inform ongoing developments in this area.

Background to prescribed lists in English

All curricula evolve and are a reflection of, or reaction to, what has gone before. The English curriculum in Ireland is no different. The current provision of prescribed lists in Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate English is a result of the evolution of the curriculum since the foundation of the state. Unlike most other English-speaking countries, in Ireland there is one curriculum for English that includes both language and literature all the way through lower and upper secondary. This integrated curriculum is common in other jurisdictions at primary and lower secondary, but in most countries the national curriculum stops at the end of compulsory education, usually at age 16. For most countries there is a divergence and increasing specialism at upper secondary in the related courses offered such as English Language, English Literature, Drama, Media Studies and Film Studies (see Table 1).

Table 1: English as a subject in selected jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	Subject title	Other related subjects or assessments
New Zealand	English	English for Academic Purposes English Language (for EAL ¹) Literacy
Ontario	English	Three courses available: Academic, Applied, Open Other courses available in The Arts (Drama, Integrated Arts, Media Arts)
England	English	GCSEs and A Levels available in English Language, English Literature, English

¹ English as an Additional Language

		Language and Literature, Drama, Film Studies, Media Studies
USA	Language Arts	No national curriculum, state/city/ district set standards, frameworks, tests.
Wales	English Language English Literature	New Curriculum for Wales includes: Expressive Arts: includes Drama, Film, Digital Media Languages, Literacy and Communication: includes Welsh, English, other languages and Literature Current qualification system has courses available in English language, English Literature, Film Studies, Drama and Theatre. Also qualifications in English for native speakers of other languages (Reading, Writing, Spoken)
Scotland	Literacy and English	Expressive Arts includes Drama
Victoria	English	Courses also available in EAL, Drama and Theatre Studies, Media Arts, critical and creative thinking
New South Wales	English	Drama, Creative Arts, Digital Media

In the Irish context, this integration of language and literature means that the range of texts available for study seeks to fulfil broad aims. The Leaving Certificate English curriculum

documentation² states that a list of prescribed texts will be provided and will include a range of novels, drama, film and poetry texts to be studied for the assessment. As outlined in Marshall's research (2022), in jurisdictions where coursework forms a predominant part of the assessment of English, prescription of texts is rare. Teachers are free to choose the texts they study with their students as the assessment of that learning is locally designed, organised and examined through coursework. Only in cases where the assessment is externally managed is the prescription of text lists a feature of the curriculum, and in Marshall's research, this was in three of the jurisdictions studied.

The use of prescribed lists of texts in Ireland has varied over time. According to Liddicoat and Crozet (2000), literature use in the classroom can aim to teach language skills but also teach culture or introduce students to what is considered the 'high canon' of literature. This cultural introduction has been a central aspect of the prescribed lists in English but what that culture is, and how it is represented has changed over time.

Historical context

Like many post-colonial countries, the English curriculum in Ireland evolved from the humanist tradition established by the British government in the provision of primary education from the 1830s and the assessment of English by the Intermediate Education Board from 1878. The course in English in 1878 was called *The language, literature and history of Great Britain and Ireland* and the prescription of texts included texts on the political history and geography of Britain. This course had two main aims: the introduction of an imperial cultural ideal and the transmission of standard English, both deemed necessary for an

² The curriculum documentation includes the published English syllabus and guidelines and circulars published by the Department of Education and State Examinations Commission since the implementation of the revised syllabus.

effective civil service. There was a significant focus on handwriting and orthography and rote learning (O'Reilly, 2014).

By the 1920s, when the new Irish Free State discussed the curriculum for post-primary education, they retained the form and structure of the previous examination system. Rather than a curriculum, the Department of Education published the requirements for examination in the Rules and Programme documentation published each year. The Commission on Secondary Education established in 1922 followed the advice offered by Padraig Pearse in *The Murder Machine* and in order to avoid excessive rote learning for examination it advised against the prescription of texts (Coolahan, 1986). However, the influence of the previously established 'canon of literature' was evident in the fact that although "No specific work or writer is in any way prescribed for examination", the rules also stated that Shakespeare must be studied "the greater tragedies and the later comedies – two at least to be read each year" (Department of Education, 1924, p.26). While no writers, other than Shakespeare, were specified, a suggested list of writers echoed the canonical lists of the Intermediate Board of Education and contained writers such as Byron, Shelley, Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson.

Despite the proclaimed nationalist objectives of the Irish Free State, the inclusion of Irish writers on the curriculum was actively discouraged by key influencers at the time. Writers such as Yeats, Wilde or Synge were dismissed as "an odd patch of fair second grade quality" (Corcoran, 1923). Worth noting also is the exclusion of fiction in the definition of literature. Courses and examinations focused on poetry, drama texts and prose essays from writers such as Bacon and Lamb. Works of literary fiction were not considered 'good literature'. This is not surprising given that under *The Censorship of Publication Act (1929)*, works that were banned on the basis that they contravened catholic teachings included books by Proust, Steinbeck, Hemmingway, Salinger, Huxley, O'Casey and O'Faolain. As these works of fiction were not suitable for public consumption they were definitely not viewed as suitable for study by students.

At Intermediate level from 1924 the requirements for examination in English included the suggestion of the completion of coursework and an oral component. However, the examination system never changed to include these elements (Coolahan, 1986) and the focus

of the examination remained on the parsing and quotation of tracts of poetry and drama texts. Despite the absence of a prescribed list, the examination questions asked students to identify and continue quotations from poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson and Keats and recognise quotations from a selection of Shakespeare plays (Department of Education Secondary Education Branch, 1925).

In 1940, there was a change of direction for the English courses in Ireland as the new Minister for Education (in addition to his role as Taoiseach), Eamon De Valera, concerned about the lack of progress in developing an Irish-speaking population, focused on a more utilitarian course for English. This course was to focus on grammar and writing effectively and more school time was allocated to the instruction of Irish. De Valera stated in the Dáil in 1941 that we would “have to be satisfied with a less high standard of English” in order to safeguard the fate of the Irish language (Dáil Debates, 1941, Col. 1095). The aims of the course were to “enable the pupil to express himself correctly and effectively in the language, both in speech and writing and to derive pleasure and profit from his reading” (*Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools 1945-46*, p. 32). Along with sections on Grammar: parsing and analysis; English composition; and a selection of prose essays, there was a prescribed list of mainly English poets with some Anglo Irish poets such as Yeats and Ledwidge included in the anthology for the first time.

In 1966 the Intermediate course for English was revised and included short stories and fiction on the course for the first time and the novel was included for higher level. Irish writers such as Friel, O’Faolain and O’Connor were included along with traditional authors such as Dickens and Austen. The new curriculum also contained the proviso that “The Intermediate Certificate Examination may include an assessment of oral proficiency” (Department of Education, 1969). However, this was never included in the summative Intermediate Examination.

The revision of the Leaving Certificate English course in 1968 attracted criticism in the media and the proposal for a common level had to be withdrawn as the universities refused to accept it for matriculation (Mullins, 2002). The revised Leaving Certificate English curriculum included, for the first time, the option to study the modern novel and included authors such

as Steinbeck, Orwell and Golding. The prescribed lists included the compulsory study of a Shakespeare play and a selection of traditional fiction texts by traditional authors such as Bronte, Hardy, Dickens and Conrad but also included twentieth century drama texts by dramatists such as Synge, Stoppard and Miller.

The next revision of the courses occurred in 1989 with the introduction of the Junior Certificate English course and in 1999 with the new Leaving Certificate English syllabus. Junior Certificate English returned to having no prescribed list of texts with teachers free to study novels, drama and poetry of their choice. However, Shakespeare remained compulsory for higher level. In the revised Leaving Certificate English syllabus (1998), the introduction of the comparative section broadened the types of texts included in the prescribed lists to include biographies, travelogues and for the first time, film.

The prescription of texts

Under the Intermediate Examination Board, a list of texts was set for examination purposes. This canon of literature became the focus of the course in English up to 1924. With the elimination of the prescribed list in 1924, the Department of Education set the examination papers to allow for a variety of answers. However, in the examinations students were asked to summarise, parse, or analyse extracts from writers such as Milton, Tennyson and Shakespeare and to quote extensively from a learned selection of literature. The questions assumed knowledge of a body of literature that was almost exclusively similar to the previous lists of prescribed texts.

In 1940, the new prescribed lists for English were set by the Department of Education and included traditional English poets along with Irish writers such as Yeats, Ledwidge and Stephens but still avoided the inclusion of fiction. In the 1960s the revised courses at Intermediate and Leaving Certificate level were supported by 'interim' texts books. *English Explorations 1, 2 and 3* for Intermediate examination and *Soundings* for Leaving Certificate poetry. These books remained in place for the duration of the courses and were edited by the chairperson of the Department of Education's English syllabus committee, Augustine Martin.

The Intermediate and Leaving Certificate English courses also had a prescribed list of texts that rotated on an annual basis that included Shakespearian plays, 18th and 19th century novels, a range of poetry and a selection of modern novels that were optional at Leaving Certificate level. In effect, the structure of the examination did not change, except to give an optional question to study two modern novels at Leaving Certificate level. The result of this saw the majority of candidates continuing to study the traditional canonical texts as before.

The absence of a prescribed list in 1989 for Junior Certificate English aimed, as the previous iteration had done, to give free rein to teachers to choose texts that suited the context and interests of their students. Chief Examiners' reports from 2003 and 2006 however reveal a limited number of texts presented for examination (see Table 2) with the list of texts limited to two Shakespeare dramas, one modern drama, three poems and one of three novels.

Table 2: Texts presented for examination

Section	Text	Percentage frequency of answering
Shakespearean Drama	Romeo and Juliet	43.1
	Merchant of Venice	42.3
Modern Drama	The Field	71.1
Poetry	Mid Term Break	18.2
	Dulce et Decorum est	17.0
	Lake Isle of Innisfree	14.2
Fiction	To Kill a Mockingbird	31.8
	Roll of Thunder	19.2
	Of Mice and Men	13.9

(Source: State Examinations Commission, 2006)

When the Leaving Certificate syllabus was revised in 1999, the prescribed list was retained but rather than a rotating list, a new list would be generated every year. This list contained a selection of modern as well as canonical texts, a variety of literary and non-literary texts including memoir and biography, a selection of films and drama texts. The suggestion that the obligation to study Shakespeare at higher level may be removed in order to give teachers broader scope to choose texts they deemed most suited to their students' needs was the subject of media outcry in advance of the publication of the syllabus and the proposal was scrapped (Mullins, 2002).

The new junior cycle specification in English (2014) returned to a prescribed list. There is a suggested list of texts for first years but for students in second and third year there is a prescribed list of novels, drama and film titles from which teachers select a number for classroom exploration and for assessment. Teachers are free to choose the poetry and short story texts they wish to study to add to the scope of texts explored by the students. The prescribed list is revised every three years and is retained for three cohorts of students. The scope of the prescribed text list is such that it includes a variety of classic literary texts along with modern novels, memoirs, travel books, graphic novels, verse novels, in a range of genres suitable for this age and stage of learning. The range of texts students are expected to explore in second and third year is detailed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Texts for exploration in years 2 and 3 of the Junior Cycle

<p>Second and Third Year students MUST study texts as described opposite</p>	<p>From the list of prescribed texts students must study:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two novels • Two drama* texts <p>* Note 1: An extract from a play or extracts from one or more plays may be used as one of the drama texts. The extracts may be chosen from outside the list of prescribed texts. The extract or extracts selected by schools should provide students with a broad experience of the dramatic form.</p>
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	* Note 2: Students intending to take the Final Assessment at Higher Level must study the full text of one of the five prescribed Shakespearean dramas listed on page four of this circular during second and/or third year.
	A film chosen from the prescribed list of films
	A variety of non-literary texts including texts in oral format
	A selection of poetry (a minimum of 16 poems over the two years)
	A number of short stories

(Source: Junior Cycle English Specification, NCCA and Department of Education and Skills, 2018)

In the review of the enactment of Junior Cycle English, external auditors of the implementation of the specification had this to say about the prescribed list:

The prominence of literature in the English curriculum specification is a notable and positive feature. However, the specification promotes the ideas of both cultural engagement and cultural diversity not only through literature but also through language and its role in learning and development, which are consistently central. There is recurring emphasis on the *integration* of spoken and written language and on the multimodality of forms of communication. Accuracy of language use is regarded as important, but not at the expense of other aspects of language development. (Heywood et al., 2019).

The absence of state examinations for junior cycle students in 2020 and 2021, means that details on the variation or scope of texts selected in response to specific examination questions is not available for these years. However, the Chief Examiner's Report for the Junior Cycle Examination in 2017 suggests that the full range of texts has

not yet been embraced in the system, “Evidence in 2017 suggests that texts commonly used by candidates in the previous Junior Certificate examination, paper two, continued to feature prominently in the 2017 Junior Cycle English examinations. This suggests that the opportunity to engage in reading as a rich and diverse experience is not being availed of to the greatest extent possible” (State Examinations Commission, 2017, p.20).

In brief, the use and absence of prescribed lists in the teaching of English in Ireland has varied over the past century. The variety and range of texts prescribed for study often reflects the context of the society from which it comes in the representation, authorship and themes included on the list (Burke, 2021). The stated aims of the curricula have encouraged wide reading and the absence of text lists has, at times, been implemented to discourage a narrowing of focus to minimum texts for examination purposes. The subsequent chief examiners’ reports, however, show that the opposite occurred, and that the absence of prescription resulted for the most part, in a very narrow selection of texts for study. The current situation, where there are prescribed lists for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate English would seem to promote a wider reading of texts. However, the chief examiners’ reports on, and the media attention to, certain traditional texts would seem to suggest that the broad lists may often be reduced to the more familiar, traditional texts for examinations. This is in contrast to the aim in the Leaving Certificate English syllabus to develop an awareness “of the value of literature in its diverse forms” (Government of Ireland and NCCA, 1998, p.6) and the aim outlined in the Junior Cycle English specification to encourage students to “engage personally with and think critically about an increasingly broad range of spoken, written and multi-modal texts” (NCCA and Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p.5). Awareness and exploration of an increasing broad and diverse range of texts is an inherent aim in the specifications and so the narrowing of student experience of literature would limit the intended aims of the specifications.

Current processes for the development of text lists

The development of text lists has, along with the curriculum, evolved over time. The original text lists of the Intermediate Board for Education were developed by the Board which comprised of academics and examiners. In the early years of the Department of Education no lists were created but the examinations were developed by the internal section of the department (many of whose members had previously worked for the Intermediate Board). By the 1960s the committee for English was led by the academic, Augustine Martin and included representatives of the Association of English Teachers.

Responsibility for generation of text lists passed from the Department of Education to the Curriculum and Examinations Board (1984 – 1987), which subsequently became the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

For the current text lists, three working groups are in existence: Junior Cycle English text list working group, Leaving Certificate English text list working group, and Leaving Certificate English poetry working group. Each group is predominantly composed of practicing teachers. The English teachers' association, the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE) is represented on each working group and membership does not have a specific duration, with some members of the Leaving Certificate text list working group having served for many years. Other members have been replaced when they moved on from the classroom teaching space to other areas of education or retired. New members have been appointed on an ad hoc basis. One of the benefits of members remaining on a working group for a number of years is that there is a level of continuity in the formation of text lists. Alongside this is a concern that there is no formal protocol in place for membership or applications for same. The membership of the working groups is not publicly published to protect the members of the committee from lobbying from publishers, writers or specific interest groups to include (or remove) texts on the list for commercial or other reasons.

The Leaving Certificate English text list working group meets several times a year to develop the text list two years in advance of implementation. The text list is an evolving document.

Approximately two thirds of the list remains the same from one year to the next to allow sufficient choice for teachers and to allow some continuity and development of capacity. In addition, most newly added texts are retained for three years to avoid a continuously changing list. Newly added texts span recently published texts and recently released films as well as classic literary texts and cinematic classics that may be included for the first time or may make a return to the list after a period of absence.

The Junior Cycle English text list remains in place for a three-year cycle and the working group meets to develop that list over the course of 12-18 months. To date, only two sets of texts lists have been developed for Junior Cycle English as the first list was retained for an additional two years to allow time for the early enactment of the specification to take root. Similar to the Leaving Certificate English text list, changes to the list are limited to approximately one quarter of the list and aim to ensure a broad spectrum of genres and a range of challenging and accessible texts are available for study.

The Leaving Certificate poetry list is developed for a five-year period by the working group. This list includes an anthology of poems by eight different poets, per year, for students studying Leaving Certificate English at higher level. There is some overlap from year to year in the poets to be studied. To facilitate mixed ability class groups and movement from higher to ordinary level, or vice versa, three poems per poet are specified as being for study at ordinary level. There is also an anthology of individual poems. This is a more diverse range of modern and recently published poems, to be studied at ordinary level. In addition, some teachers use this list with students at both higher and ordinary level, to develop their capacity to respond authentically and critically to an unseen poem.

Each of the working groups receives input from other sources, including expert academic input and input from specific agencies such as the Irish Film Board, the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO), the Irish Theatre Institute, Creative Ireland, Children's Books Ireland and Poetry Ireland among others. Deliberations of the working groups are informed by input from the Department of Education inspectorate, the State Examinations Commission, and Junior Cycle for Teachers. There is also an online form on NCCA's website

www.curriculumonline.ie for teachers, parents, students or other members of the public to suggest texts or comment on the current lists. Suggestions and observations from this portal are brought to working group meetings for discussion. Members of all three working groups participate on a voluntary basis and receive travel and related expenses for their work on the lists.

Each of the working groups refers to and is guided by a set of criteria for the production of the text lists and there are a number of informal practices that inform the production of the lists. These practices, as mentioned above, include the limitation of the number of changes made in any one year and the inclusion of a number of texts that are accessible for all students. The full criteria for inclusion on the lists are detailed below:

JUNIOR CYCLE ENGLISH TEXT LIST CRITERIA

Each prescribed list must give due recognition to the following:

- A. Classic texts
- B. Modern and contemporary texts, including young adult literature

Each list will include / consider:

1. Stimulating and engaging texts
2. Wide and varied range of texts
3. General suitability (violence & sexual scenes: how frequent?/explicit?; sensitive issues, e.g., rape, paedophilia, suicide)
4. Diversity (national literature/film and literature/film from different cultures)
5. Gender equity (content and authorship)
6. Accessibility/Inclusion

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- ❖ Version of the text (if multiple versions available, specify which one)
- ❖ Availability (in print etc...)
- ❖ Online survey re: suggestions from teachers
- ❖ Student voice
- ❖ Expert input – from within and without working group

Revised 2016

LEAVING CERTIFICATE ENGLISH POETRY SELECTION CRITERIA

Each poetry list must give due recognition to the following:

- A. Classical/canonical poets and poems
- B. Modern/contemporary poets and poems

The following areas to be reflected:

1. Irish poets/poems
2. European and Non-European poets/poems
3. Gender Equity (content and authorship)
4. Diversity and inclusion
5. Accessibility (specifically for Ordinary Level)
6. Comparative potential – with other poems and other texts
7. General Suitability (consideration of socially unacceptable words; the presence of violence and/or sexual scenes; sensitive issues e.g., rape, paedophilia, suicide)

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Version of the text (if multiple versions available, specify which one)
- Online survey re: teachers' views of existing poetry lists
- Student voice

Revised 2018

LEAVING CERTIFICATE ENGLISH TEXT LIST CRITERIA

Each list must give due recognition to the following:

- A. Classical Texts
- B. Modern and Contemporary Texts

The following areas to be reflected:

1. Irish Texts
2. European and Non-European Texts
3. Gender Equity (content and authorship)
4. Diversity and inclusion
5. Young Adult Literature
6. Accessibility (specifically for Ordinary Level)
7. Comparative Potential
8. General Suitability (consideration of socially unacceptable words; the presence of violence and/or sexual scenes; sensitive issues e.g. rape, paedophilia, suicide)

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Version of the text (if multiple versions available, specify which one)
- Availability (in print, etc. ...)
- Online survey re: suggestions from teachers
- Student voice
- Expert input (from within and without working group)

Revised 2018

International research

Arising from the comparative study on English curricula carried out by Dr. Bethan Marshall (2022) and research for this report, the following observations may be made.

NAME AND FOCUS

The English curriculum has many guises and different names across the jurisdictions reviewed, such as English, English Language, and English Literature, though all of them have English in the title except the United States (Language Arts) and some include literacy, such as Scotland and Victoria, Australia. National curricula for English tend to cover the experience of compulsory education (usually until age 16). At upper secondary, there is evidence of specialisation and diversification of courses that include English language and literature but also courses such as drama, film studies, media or creative arts.

ASSESSMENT

All jurisdictions examined in Dr. Marshall's research have examination systems that allow for coursework, except England and potentially the US. Canada has 100% coursework and New Zealand has the potential for 100% coursework. Australia has 50% coursework and Scotland has just under a third. Wales is under review. There is some evidence that an examination system where prescribed texts are externally examined rather than assessed as part of coursework can restrict the number of texts studied and lends teachers less autonomy to select texts to best support their students' learning.

RANGE OF TEXTS

Apart from England, all jurisdictions examined in Marshall's research ask students to study some kind of digital or media text. They also specify that you should study your own country's literature. England, New South Wales and Victoria list authors for study for

examination. England, and at present Wales, make studying a Shakespearean text compulsory at 16 years of age as does New South Wales at 18 years of age.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

Three jurisdictions give lists of texts to be studied (as well as Wales for the present) - England, New South Wales and Victoria. Only Victoria gives a rationale for the texts selected (https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/Principles_Guidelines_Texts.pdf). Evidence suggests, however, that despite the often wide range of texts offered, a very narrow selection is chosen and they tend to be by British authors. In England, the prescribed lists published by the various examination boards tend to look to the specifications of the national curriculum and, again, evidence suggests that the majority of texts chosen are classic novels and plays by dead white men. Only 6% of pre-twentieth century texts chosen by the examination boards are by women and only 1% are by writers published after 1914. Only 0.7% of texts chosen are by people of colour. The US has lists of texts to be studied if schools decide to follow the Hirsch curriculum. Again, works by dead white men predominate.

DIVERSITY OF TEXTS

As jurisdictions in Australia, Canada and New Zealand include first nation authors in the aims of their curricula and, in Australia, within their exam syllabi, all students encounter some texts by first nation authors. However, diversity is not often achieved. Canada does seem to be making headway in promoting first nation literature. In Great Britain, organisations such as the National Association of the Teaching of English (NATE) and the English and Media Centre, promote decolonising the curriculum as well as ethnically diverse writers and again some of these writers are evident in the English exam syllabi. Penguin and the Runnymede Trust have also recently published a report entitled, *Diversity in Literature in English Schools* (Elliott *et al.*, 2021). The National Council of Teachers of English in the US also encourage teachers to diversify their text selection, particularly in light of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Comparison of processes

Only three of the jurisdictions examined by Marshall (2022) publish lists of prescribed texts in English for students to study: England, New South Wales and Victoria.

In England the lists of prescribed texts are developed by the individual examination boards. The boards, of which there are four, (AQA, Edexcel, OCR, WJEC) are independent of the Department for Education but still have to subscribe to the guidelines in the national curriculum. Students studying for the literature exam have to study one Shakespeare play, a nineteenth century novel and a twentieth century British playwright or novelist. Although there are no authors other than Shakespeare within the national curriculum, the list of texts given for potential study is limited even though there are no official criteria given to the boards as to what texts should be chosen. The selection of texts for all boards is done by a committee of individuals who are asked to be members. No posts are advertised. The committee includes teachers who typically examine for the board, and academics, as well as people who work for the board. Membership is not published and the committee operates without any level of public transparency.

In New South Wales, the lists are produced by a committee, which is established by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA). The committee includes teachers, but there does not appear to be any consultation with the wider teaching profession in the development and composition of the lists or any opportunity for feedback from the profession on existing text lists or on specific texts they would like to see included. The committee has criteria for the selection of the texts. These criteria include literary merit, enduring significance, relevance for the cohorts, and accessibility in terms of how easy it is for schools to access the texts without an undue additional financial burden.

In Victoria, Text Lists are decided by a Text Advisory Panel. This panel is chaired by the Curriculum Manager for English and consists of 8 - 10 teachers from a range of school settings, and typically one academic. Teachers apply to be on the panel and membership is often publicly available. Ultimately, approval of the panel's decision is given by the Victorian

Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). They have rejected text choices in the past if they consider them too controversial. There is often debate in the media about text choices and the merit of these, and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority attempts to avoid this by publishing the criteria and decision-making protocols for the text lists.

In comparison to these international practices, the process for text selection in Ireland does have input from the teaching profession and the public via the online portal. The working groups generally consist of 5 members, including the Chair, who is the NCCA Education Officer for English. In the Junior Cycle text list working group, three members are practising English teachers, at least one of whom is a member of the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE) and one is an English teacher with experience of working with the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) support service. In the Leaving Certificate text list working group, four members are practising English teachers, at least one of whom is a member of the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE) and one of whom has experience as an examiner of Leaving Certificate English with the State Examinations Commission (SEC). The Leaving Certificate Poetry working group generally consists of the chair, the NCCA Education Officer for English; two practising teachers of English; a representative of Poetry Ireland; and a poet.

Similar to the other jurisdictions, decision-making is a deliberative process, informed by a set of criteria. Minutes of the text list committee meetings are not currently published nor is membership of the committee or the criteria for selection, although the criteria are available via email upon request. The criteria reference issues of representation, diversity, and inclusion, and are regularly updated, unlike in some of the other jurisdictions examined in Dr. Marshall's research. The balance between the number of newly added texts on the lists and the continuity of many texts already on the list ensures that there is a contemporary mix of texts on the lists and attempts to mitigate against a narrowing of focus to a limited number of canonical texts.

Issues and concerns

In keeping with the aims of the Junior Cycle English specification and the Leaving Certificate English syllabus, the range of texts on the prescribed lists encourage a **wide range of reading** and engagement with a variety of texts. The lists endeavour to include representation from a variety of cultures, backgrounds and authors to enable students to 'see themselves in the texts'. The lists also aim to provide texts that would be accessible to students with a range of abilities and proficiency and relevant to the age and stage of the students.

One of the concerns expressed in relation to the range of texts offered is the **time pressure** experienced by teachers of English, many of whom teach different text lists to different year groups. The pressures faced by teachers have been frequently expressed to the NCCA via the online form on www.curriculumonline.ie, via representations from the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE) and via Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). Familiarity with, and the range of resources available for traditional texts on the lists, may to some degree account for the dominance of traditional texts in student responses to examination questions. Additional supports for new texts on the lists may help in this regard. The Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) offers a range of supports for teachers of English at Junior Cycle and highlights the possibilities for engaging teaching of new texts on the lists. While support for the Leaving Certificate text list was robust in the initial years after introduction of the new syllabus, in the intervening 20 years those supports have become more limited over time but could be further developed in conjunction with teacher support services.

Increasing media and social media interest in the **text selection in schools** and pressures to justify decisions taken by teachers when selecting texts from the list, has had a limiting influence on the texts chosen. Feedback from the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE) have referred to negative engagement with school authorities under pressure to defend text decisions made by teachers in schools though it is not clear how widespread this experience has been. The publication of the text list criteria and reasons for inclusion on the list may alleviate some of

the pressures felt by schools to justify decisions made. This paper may also support reflection and discussion within and across English subject departments and in in-person and online fora supporting English teachers.

One of the issues that has gained prominence over the past few years has been **dealing with sensitive issues** in class. The Black Lives Matter movement raised questions about how issues such as race and representation were dealt with in English classes and anecdotal evidence exists of cases where such issues were not well handled. The English classroom is a space where issues such as love, loss, revenge, power, race, class, authority, etc. are discussed and examined, usually in response to issues arising in texts studied. How these themes and issues should be handled, particularly if there is an issue that may be directly relevant to the lived experience of a student or students, is not the remit of the text list itself. However, additional resources or training in relation to dealing with sensitive issues in class, and in exploring language and/or attitudes which are reflective of their time but no longer acceptable, may be useful to teachers.

In comparison with the other jurisdictions examined, the **transparency of the text list process** in Ireland fares well. However, there are areas where this could be improved. While there are criteria for selection, these criteria are not published, nor is the process for the selection of texts. The membership of the text list committees is not in the public realm but given the size of the population the anonymity of the committee membership is probably helpful in preventing inappropriate lobbying and ensuring that those who take part continue to do so for the good of the subject. There are no terms of reference for membership on the committees and the development of such terms would enable the process to have more transparency in the future. The development of protocols for the selection of texts would also make explicit the stages of the decision-making process that remain implicit at present.

Next steps

Drawing on Marshall's research (2022) and the comparisons set out in this report, the following actions are proposed as next steps in further developing the process through which text lists are generated in Ireland and in providing greater support for schools and teachers in working with a wider range of texts.

- Decision making protocols for prescribed text selection to be developed and brought to NCCA's structures, the Boards for Junior and Senior Cycle and Council.
- Terms of reference for the membership of the text list committees to be developed and brought to the Board. This will include an application process for membership of the committees and a specified term for committee membership, with the option to renew membership for one further term, where appropriate.
- Continuation of work with the support agencies and INOTE to develop awareness and resources for new texts, alongside consideration of further ways to support teachers in dealing with sensitive issues in class.

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