

SET TEXT STUDY:
A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committee.

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Date

Abstract

This thesis investigates the practice of set text study as it is encountered within the English curriculum of a Victorian secondary school. The study evolved from a range of concerns to do with the researcher's own teaching and the attitudes being expressed in her school community. It developed into an investigation of the student experience of reading, and of studying the required texts in subject, English

This research aims to:

- provide understanding of the development of set text study and to consider whether this construct is meeting the goals of contemporary English teaching
- examine both the beliefs which underpin the practices and the practices themselves
- provide greater understanding of the way students experience this aspect of their school learning
- consider how notions of transformation, insight and emerging identity through literature study fit with student experience.

Five guiding research questions address the issues which gave rise to the study. These questions provide a focus and structure throughout the research process. The questions address issues of: students' school and non-school reading practices, enjoyment, beliefs about learning, ideology and specifically, the potential influence of textual representations of suicide and adult characters on a teenage student's emerging sense of self.

An overview of key theoretical positions on the act of reading situates the attitudinal and theoretical aspects of this research. The practical orientation of this study is situated alongside research on the experience of reading and of teaching literature, both from Australia and overseas.

This thesis adopts a phenomenological approach within a constructivist framework. A qualitative methodology using a case-study approach, allows for the prolonged engagement necessary to explore the research questions and develop the sort of relationship necessary to facilitate the in-depth and reflective responses being sought. In-depth interviews (both face-to-face interviews and on-line chat sessions) are the primary data-gathering tool.

In reporting the findings, the student voice is privileged. Practical and theoretical notions of communication and language are explored. The processes used to undertake this research are reflected upon and some possibilities for incorporating some of these methods into a school learning context are considered.

While the focus of the study is to increase understanding of individual experience, some clear findings emerge. Although reading played an important part in the non-school lives of most of these students, the school experience of reading was more often than not, disappointing. Key factors which students perceived as contributing to their lack of enjoyment and satisfaction included: text choice, lack of challenge in lesson content, the sameness of the associated tasks, the behaviour of peers and lack of opportunity for having their opinions heard. Almost conversely, the students who gained greatest satisfaction reported on: particular texts, the creativity and scope for individual input of required tasks,

teacher involvement, more positive class interaction and specific modelling by teachers of required tasks.

The thesis concludes with recommendations for structural support (both whole school and classroom) to enable the positive shared reading experiences to become the experience of more students. It challenges the sanctity of *the* set text and offers a range of alternatives. It calls on teachers to consider the implications of entering a continuing story of students' reading and to work at developing better ways of incorporating components of effective non-school reading practices into school reading practices.

The concerns regarding the potential negative influence of set texts on a student's identity were not validated in this research. However new concerns for students' well being did emerge. The research indicates that set texts can make a difference to the quality of students' lives. By incorporating a range of texts and class activities, by knowing students as well as possible, and by fully engaging as co-readers, teachers are in a better position to minimise student distress and to attend to the work of creating democratic reading environments with the greatest potential for reading success for everyone.

Acknowledgements

When I embarked on this doctoral research, I was told that it would be a lonely and isolated undertaking. In spite of the solitary hours, I have not found that to be the case. These five years have been rich and varied and full of stimulating companionship. I am grateful to all those who have enabled this to be.

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1 An Introduction to the study

1.1 *The researcher as teacher*

In the last year of the twentieth century, I was working as a full time classroom teacher in a Victorian secondary school. Most of my teaching was happening in English classrooms; that was the location of my teaching. I knew that most of my students' learning was happening in places other than my classrooms.

As with others who trained in the late 1970s, I was taught English by people coming from a Leavisite (Leavis, 1948) position who subscribed to the view that the subject English was primarily comprised of a valued body of western literature which could be subjected to close textual analysis and which had the capacity to instil values. Both they and I grew up with the concept of "set texts", the books chosen for compulsory study in the subject English. While I wouldn't at that time have thought in terms of a theoretical position, I know that notions of transformation through literature and the introduction of students to *good literature* gave credibility to what was at the heart of why I wanted to teach. I loved what words could do and I wanted the students I taught to know it as well.

I was in my 12th year of teaching. I had taught in urban and rural schools, in public and private schools, in Australia and overseas. No matter where I was, I had never taught in a place where books were not the basis of the English curriculum and my situation in 1999 was no different. The set texts, most often junior fiction novels or classic literature, were used as the basis for the teaching and learning that occurred in the subject, English. What was different in that year was my attitude. I had begun to wonder whether I was not only failing in having my students share my love of reading and writing, but whether, through the teaching processes I was using, I was further turning them away. It was an unease shared by others (Wilhelm, 1997; Cone, 2000; Yaman, 2000; Brennan, 2001).

Within a year of beginning my doctorate, I was appointed to an administrative and welfare role within the same school. I was still primarily a classroom English teacher, but had administrative and welfare responsibility for a quarter of the school's senior campus

students. This work presented more questions as I grappled with some of the school's most serious welfare issues.

In the light of some of the disturbing situations that were arising, I began to question many of the existing school practices. In particular, I wondered about set text study and whether or not what we were requiring students to do, might actually be reinforcing patterns or attitudes or behaviours that it would be better to challenge. I wondered about some of the patterns I was noticing in adolescent fiction, images of teenage recreational pursuits, absent fathers and dreary mothers. What effect if any, did studying such representations have for these students? Did it matter that some of these representations were being encountered repeatedly in set text study? At the same time, my unease was exacerbated by anecdotal talk from parents wanting to know why their children had to deal with so many bleak books. I wondered if the students cared or noticed any of these details, or whether they were just adult concerns.

For myself, I was feeling dissatisfied with the conflict between my own goals in being an English teacher and what seemed to be happening, or not happening, for my students. I started to expand some of this thinking. I wanted to know if there was any truth in the anecdotal talk of all the books being so bleak and whether the students experienced them as such. I began to reflect on some of the recurring images that seemed to me to be present in the adolescent fiction being studied at that time. At a time when it seemed boys and reading had become a dominant preoccupation in educational circles, I thought more about representations of adult males occurring in the novels students were required to read? Were these men presented as companions, heroes, fringe-dwellers? Did they enjoy their relationship with the young characters? In what settings were they represented? How were they located in the narrative? What critical thinking was being required of students in relation to these characters through the set text activities? Were the images reinforced or challenged in other set text readings? But most significantly of all, I wanted to know whether, as a result of their reading and associated class activities; the students saw any possibilities for their own lives.

I wondered about the teaching ideals of providing enjoyment and leading students to more reading. Were either of these goals being achieved? If, as the literature and anecdotal evidence suggested, teachers set books they believed had the potential for transformation,

was that transformation occurring, or conversely, was the literature affecting students negatively?

My unease at what I perceived as the disenchantment of so many of my students with set text study was tempered by my own feelings of gratitude for what set text study had provided for me. As a high school student, I had been introduced through set texts to books and writers that have provided some of the most enduring satisfactions and pleasures of my life. Being conscious of how much I wanted set text study to provide similar satisfactions and pleasures for my students was at least one of the biases I was knowingly bringing to the research.

1.2 Formulating the questions

As I began to read more explicitly in the educational field, I was surprised by how little research had been conducted from the point of view of the students, particularly classroom-based research. I also became more attuned to the inherent tensions within research such as I was proposing, as I became more familiar with shifting beliefs about texts and reading. I altered my focus somewhat, from the texts themselves and the adult concerns, to wondering about the students' experiences of, and relationships with, these texts. I still wanted to know if set text study leads to more or less reading. I wanted to make some sort of assessment of the anecdotal claim about the bleak books, but I became more concerned with how the students perceived the books they were required to study. I became conscious of the literature pertaining to the examination of the presence of dominant cultural narratives (Oliver & Lalik, 2001) and ideological positions (Lee, 1991; Rothery & Veel, 1993; Kamler & Comber, 1996), but I wanted to know if students saw themselves as being orientated towards a particular position. I was wondering about the representation of situations and characters in the novels and I wanted to understand the students' reactions to and perceptions of these. I wanted to know whether any of these features, but particularly the repeated representations of suicide, were likely to have an impact on an adolescent student's emerging sense of identity.

By the time I was beginning my research, I had settled on a key question.

What is the experience of set text study like for students?

Conscious that there would have to be limits within such a broad question, I still wanted to retain the breadth as I felt it allowed for understandings which might emerge through the research process. At the same time, I needed to establish parameters to guide the research and to be able to proceed effectively. In setting these parameters I wanted to establish the place of reading (school and non-school, print and non-print) in the students' lives. I then focussed on what seemed to me to be key concepts within the broad understanding I was seeking; enjoyment, perception of learning from set text study, processes of and attitudes to reading, and ideology.

From these concepts, I devised five sub questions:

- Where does set text study/ reading fit in the student's world of reading, especially in terms of other reading practices, digital, electronic and non-school print reading?
- Do students perceive set text study as providing worthwhile learning opportunities?
- Are the students gaining enjoyment from their set text study and does it lead to more reading?
- Do the students identify with adult characters in a way that would allow them to incorporate aspects of these representations into their emerging identity?
- Do the students identify with situational representations, in particular that of suicide, in a way that would allow them to see these events as possibilities for their own lives?

1.3 Significance of the research

The comparative lack of research undertaken from the perspective of students is one of the strongest arguments for this research. If we are serious about recognising the diversity of learning styles and the worth of enacting democratic processes, then it behoves us as educators and researchers to attend to the day to day lived experience of the learners. Other researchers offer their findings on classroom-based research, but advocate for teachers to look at the learning environments they are creating, to research their own classrooms and students and so be in an informed position to create new learning environments (Cherland, 1994; Wilhelm, 1997; van der Hoevan, 2002).

Because the teaching practices that have evolved around the construct of the set text are so embedded in the way English is taught, administered and assessed, it is important to understand the assumptions that underlie these practices, and to ascertain whether the beliefs which sustain the practices are justified.

The next chapter highlights the predominance of the novel as the key set text in schools, despite efforts to broaden the concept. It is important that research is undertaken within actual school contexts. As a practising classroom teacher in a secondary school, I have been in an ideal situation to undertake a longitudinal study within a school context.

In the Victorian school system, English is the subject which every student must study at every level. In the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the final certificate of the school system, English is the only compulsory subject. VCE students must pass three of their four VCE English units to gain their VCE. Facilitating this is an expensive component of the school budget, both in terms of time and money. The set text dominates the curriculum. Because of this outlay, it makes good sense to assess how effective the teaching practices surrounding the set text are. More significantly, it makes good sense to undertake research, which contributes to greater understanding of the implications of current practices for students.

Not only did I find a dearth of literature based on the experience of individual student readers in schools, but like Wilhelm, I found that much of the existing literature on

literary theory looked at “model readers instead of real ones” (Wilhelm, 1997). My own research was developed with the intention of understanding the individual experience of set text study for a small number and range of real student readers in a contemporary school setting.

An examination of student response to particular textual representation and to associated class activities is important because of the seriousness of the social issues involved. In presenting this thesis, I am accepting the intertextual experience of students’ lives, but I am arguing that it is still important to look at this component of their textual experience over which we do have some control. I am also arguing that it is important to look beyond the ideology of single texts to examining whether students are gaining particular views of the world or themselves from the package of texts which students encounter in the formal English curriculum of the secondary school years. If we are to understand the process of literary engagement enough to make any sort of assessment, then we need to analyse the way texts invite readers in.

Stories transmit culture, and so transmit ideology. Whether the story is a Shakespeare play, an Aboriginal myth, or *Seinfeld*, what is happening, is that it is working to provide for us a model of what the world is like, and to seduce us into seeing the world in that particular way. Again, this makes the process by which we are drawn into the vision of the world as shown particularly significant.

(Misson, 1998, p. 105-106)

1.4 Outline of the thesis

In this opening chapter, I have sought to show how my personal teaching interests and professional situation merged to give me the impetus to commence this research. Initial pre-reading and my increasing desire to understand what this ongoing experience of set text study was like for students, furthered me on the path of pursuing the research from the students’ point of view. My pre-reading and the nature of my professional work led me to choose an in-depth methodological approach in which I worked with a small number of students in order to understand what the experience of set text study has been like for them. While the initial impetus for this study stemmed from my dissatisfaction

with my teaching, the momentum has been sustained by my on-going administrative and welfare work and increasing interest in the reading process.

In order to allow readers to understand how the set text has evolved to its contemporary form, a brief history is provided in Chapter 2. Some of the specific features particular to the research site are also provided here to assist readers in gaining an overview of less obvious but important factors, which indirectly contribute to a student's experience. Alongside this local, cultural and historical overview, I reflect on the primary place in curriculum that the printed set text has maintained, despite the technological possibilities and academic push for newer and more diverse text types. An analysis of contemporary curriculum documents and the phenomenon of adolescent literature provide evidence of altered ways of thinking about set texts and other pressures that contribute to the way set text study in schools is undertaken.

Chapter 3 begins by outlining some key theoretical perspectives on reading and showing how evolving literary theory has contributed to the formation of the set text construct, as we know it. This is followed by an explanation of the work of other theorists and researchers whose beliefs have influenced my thinking about school reading. The chapter concludes by reporting on the notion of transformation through literature as expressed by writers, teachers and teenagers.

While I have used the work of a number of international teacher/researchers in Chapter 4, I have particularly focussed on providing an Australian perspective on classroom processes of set text study. I have examined some of the beliefs about appropriate texts and the role of the teacher. In response to some of the professional concerns, I report on the work of some who have examined youth suicide in the context of literary and media representations.

The choice of methodological approach in relation to the theoretical base from which this study developed, is explained in Chapter 5. Specific features of the project design and the two distinct approaches towards data gathering are described. This is followed by an explanation of the approaches taken in relation to the issue of validity and the analysis and reporting of the data.

In reporting and analysing the findings from this research in Chapter 6 and 7, the discussion is structured within the framework that evolved from the guiding research questions. Although I have tried to privilege the students' voices, the students' words are intertwined with my reflective and interpretive comments so that focus could be maintained on the specific research concerns.

In the final chapter of the thesis, the findings are linked to the political and cultural issues and the research questions raised in Chapter 1, and the key findings of other researchers outlined in the preceding chapters. I reflect on the processes used to undertake this research and posit some possibilities for incorporating some of these methods within a school context. Finally, I consider the implications of the reported findings for my own and for other teaching situations.

2 The set text within the Victorian school setting

2.1 The construct of set text

Australia has developed quite separate educational systems within its state boundaries. Attempts have been made to centralize policy and procedures, but these have, so far, been unsuccessful (Patterson, 2000, p. 237). The set text is a phenomenon which exists across Australia (as well as in many other countries), however, this examination of specific contextual features of set text study will be based in Victoria, the state in which this research took place.

Although texts are prescribed in many subject areas, the term “set text” is now used both colloquially and in academic discourse to refer to the text used in English which students are required to study intensively. It is common to teach a unit of work based on this text. Students are either required to read the text before the unit begins or during the teaching of the unit, though many teachers have reported that they have needed to read the texts during the unit to ensure that it has actually been read. Subsequent to this reading, it is usual practice to engage students in a series of tasks or learning activities.

The construct of the set text has existed in Victorian schools for decades. Patterson identified the 1920s as the turning point when literature became the focus of the English curriculum (2000). Until then, English had comprised elements of the primary school curriculum of composition, recitation, grammar, spelling, and literature study. Beavis (1996) developed the notion of the set text within its non-Aboriginal Australian historical and cultural framework. She demonstrated how culturally based the phenomenon is, from the moralistic *Irish National Readers* and the nationalistic *Australian Reader* through to the revised VCE set texts which need to serve a much more culturally and academically diverse clientele. Marion Meiers described a similar historical evolution of the set text, noting not only the diversity of texts currently being prescribed but the increased number of texts students are required to study in contrast to the one set text of earlier decades (2001).

Ex students from one of the founding schools of the research site spoke to me about their experience of “set text” in the 1940s.

It was just a small group of us...about six students. We were the Leaving Honours group, so not many students went to that level then. The teacher read to us. I think she really liked doing that. She read the whole book. It was *Vanity Fair* by Thackeray.

(K.M.Shine, personal communication, November 6th, 2002)

In the early 2000s, the situation in this school’s classrooms is very different from that portrayed by Shine. The class sizes have expanded to 26 or more; the number of text novels has increased to up to four per year. The backgrounds and the aspirations of the students have become much more diverse. The concept of the teacher reading the book to students has become a contested issue. The students are coming from a world that has been altered by technological change. Reading practices have broadened accordingly. But in spite of the contextual changes, the detailed study of a book as the focus of English teaching is essentially the same practice as it was in the 1940s.

Much of what was presented in academic discourse in the late 1990s/early 2000s through conferences and academic papers suggested that as the notion of text had broadened, so too had practices and attitudes towards text and that even more dramatic changes were pending. Robin Peel et al. claimed that the “curriculum is about to take on the biggest seismic shift since popular education was established in the nineteenth century” (Green, 2001, p.250). While Green himself accepts the diversity of text types, he sees teaching practice as retaining the same focus. In his discussion on picturing the future of English, he wrote.

However there is much in the ‘form’ of English teaching that remains pretty much the same...English is still (re) presented as “text-centric” as focused firmly on working with texts, on doing things with texts, albeit these are now increasingly seen as multi-modal (potentially at least).

(Green, 2001, p. 250)

The value in using popular texts in the secondary classroom has been a consistent theme throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Beavis & Durrant, 2001; Faulkner, 1996, 2002;

Misson, 1998, 2003; Morgan 2003) with researchers arguing for recognition of the learning processes and literacy demands of computer games, popular magazines, blockbuster films and interactive hyper-texts. While Misson has argued for the use of popular texts in the classroom, he has acknowledged that his concerns apply to any narrative text (Misson, 1998, p.105). More recently while arguing for the role of teachers in developing the imaginative process, Misson urged teachers not to accept uncritically anything that is presented in “the name of imagination (Misson, 2003, p. 32). My research applies primarily to novel texts. It is an attempt to look critically at the experience provided by the particular use of the current set of set texts, but the same concerns could be raised in relation to a whole range of text types. The argument for examining the cumulative experience of set text study stands, whatever the text type.

Faulkner whose research charts her development to embrace the popular text as “set text”, is not only critical of the failure to transform teaching practices to adapt to a transformed world, but is critical of the blame attributed to students when the adaptation has not occurred.

While the world is transforming, many teaching approaches are not. Students are often the recipients of linear, print-dominated and narrowly-based instruction methods, founded on traditional ideas of what English should be. Too frequently, teachers rue students’ short attention spans, inability to engage with a particular exercise or failure to write a ‘decent’ essay. If a student is indifferent to what is being communicated in lessons, the fault is deemed to lie with the student, not with the teaching theories and practices.

(Faulkner, 2002, p. 2)

In the two schools in which I’ve worked from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s, there is no hint of the “seismic shift” referred to by Green or the transformation Faulkner would like to see. Neither school practices, including administrative, financial or curriculum, nor attitudes or teaching practices have altered enough to allow this sort of change.

Competing forces of economic limitations on the purchase of computer hardware and software, structural practices in schools, an aging teaching profession, embedded cultural attitudes, and most significantly, the orientation of the Year 12 externally examined

syllabus have ensured that books dominate the curriculum at all levels of secondary schooling.

The schools in which I've taught have had a highly print orientated approach to text, and more specifically, the orientation has continued to focus on books, principally novels. It is important that research is undertaken which examines actual practices in schools rather than ideal situations, which are not supported by existing school structures.

2.2 Set text within the school context

Practices, which ultimately contribute to an individual student's experience of set text study, are well in place before the selection of set texts occurs. It was not within the scope of this thesis to explore the issues behind these practices, but it is worth naming some of them. It is unlikely that these factors would be identified by students, yet recognising their potential impact on how the construct of "set text" exists within this school, is essential for a complete reading.

Budgets not only provide information on where money is spent, but provide vital clues to the priorities of schools and some of the reasons behind existing practices. The 2004 school enrolment at the research site is 1040. The 2004 budget for all Key Learning Areas (subject areas) is \$701,100. The annual budget for the English Key Learning Area is \$19,000. All students study English at every level. The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning budget is \$12,800. (Seven students are enrolled in this course). The Science Key Learning Area budget is \$38,000. The Arts budget is \$78,300. The Technology budget is \$113,000. The relatively small English budget and lack of access to the two computer rooms on each campus might reinforce the use of conservative, less expensive practices.

Staffing practices may have even more direct implications on curriculum. The English Faculty is comprised of 23 staff, 16 female staff and 7 male staff. Forty-nine units of English are currently offered. Of these, 36 units are taught by female staff, 13 units are taught by male staff. Considering the contested understanding of "text", it might be important that the Information Technology Department is staffed entirely by men and the library staffed entirely by women. Except when students are required to buy individual

copies of a text, text purchasing is the role of the library. Computer hardware and software is purchased through the Information Technology department.

A significant feature of this school is the vertical curriculum. This was implemented in 2001. The change was designed to provide students with greater curriculum choice with the capacity for moving ahead or slowing down or choosing units according to personal preference. In reality, most students complete units alongside their year level peers. At the time of implementation there was significant staff resistance, so as a compromise, staff were encouraged to adapt existing curriculum to the new structure. Obviously, choice can only be offered to the extent that staff attitudes and the budget support it. One of the unforeseen features of the vertical system is that subjects, such as science which traditionally have offered no choice, now offer a range of units, whereas English which in many schools offers a range of electives is not able to offer more choice than other subjects. The actual curriculum experience will be elaborated on in relation to the findings of this research (see Chapters 6 & 7). The conversion of the curriculum from a year-based course to a semester-based unit has not significantly changed the content of the English curriculum.

2.3 Curriculum documentation and implementation

While most practising teachers are unlikely to undertake intensive study of literary criticism pertaining to the texts they are required to teach, it is evident that the present day approach towards the teaching of literature, both as the subject Literature, and within the mainstream English curriculum, has been influenced by contemporary literary theory, particularly the branch of post-structuralism we have come to know as deconstruction. Traditional teaching methods tended to focus on close analysis of text in an effort to unravel “the truth” of a given text. Leavis, perhaps the critic who most influenced the way literature has been studied in schools and universities held that, “literary analysis should contain nothing that cannot be produced from, or related back to, the text itself” (Macey, 2000, p.225). This text-centric approach has been challenged by the post-structural movement of the latter part of last century, which, put simply, draws attention to the ‘constructedness’ of texts and the potential power of the reader.

In her research on the revised VCE study, English Literature, Beavis (2000), found that the nature of the assessment tasks had changed radically as a result of altered ways of thinking about the notions of reader and text. One assessment task required students to demonstrate their "thinking about what's assumed by a text, thinking about the context of a text and the effect of being written in a particular time and a particular place" (p.56). Explanations such as "conventional metaphors reveal much about how individuals and cultures shape meanings"(p.185), and definitions of concepts such as "intertextuality" (p.182), both found in the glossary of a middle school English text book published on behalf of the Victorian Government (Howes, 1998), show how entrenched altered notions of literary theory have become.

The *Curriculum and Standards Framework Document (1995) (CSF)*, which was the standard Victorian Government curriculum document, detailed the curriculum focus for reading at levels 6 and 7 in the following way:

Teachers provide opportunities for students to select texts for an increasing range of purposes, including reading for pleasure. They assist students to manage and reflect on their reading program and encourage them to use particular techniques such as asking questions in the role of another character, and paired discussions to develop more subtle and critical interpretations of texts. This helps them to create their own texts more creatively and effectively.

(Board of Studies, English CSF, 1995 p.67)

Notions of the authority of the reader, including a student reader are evident in the 1995 version of the state curriculum documents, but by 2000, there was a much clearer emphasis on the reader's role in constructing meaning, on multiple readings and the influencing factors of a text's construction.

Teachers emphasise the contextual factors involved in the construction and interpretation of texts, especially the way audiences construct meaning... Students consider how values may have changed since the text was constructed and how texts are likely to be reinterpreted by different groups.

(Board of Studies, English CSF 11, 2000, p.76)

It is mandated that government high schools use this document as the basis of curriculum, another indication of how embedded this way of thinking about reader and text has become. The curriculum of the school in which the research took place has based its curriculum, including reporting and assessment documentation on the CSF.

2.4 The phenomenon of “Young Adult Literature”

At the time of formulating the questions for this research, I had been teaching English classes where the adolescent novel dominated the curriculum. From the time of the publication of Salinger’s “Catcher in the Rye”, the market has steadily adapted to the teenage market, publishing and marketing fiction specifically designed to appeal to teenagers and generally promoted under broad headings such as “Young Adult Literature” and “Junior Fiction”. This development holds particular relevance to this research because of the publisher’s potential influence in determining which books and often learning tasks, (based on supplied study guides), are used in schools.

Strong views have been expressed on this phenomenon. Heather Scutter, a Melbourne academic argued in her book, *Displaced Fictions* (1999), that contemporary Australian junior fiction has not always measured up, either in its predominant attitudes or in its language. She described prolific adolescent fiction writer, Victor Kelleher's prose as "straining, platitudinous, dull and prurient" (p.36) and criticised the consistently negative portrayal of humanity. (pp.36-41). This theme was reiterated throughout the book. Scutter argued that there is too much of “the grey worlds and hopelessness in the books published in recent years”. She also criticised the stereotypical features found in adolescent fiction. “Nostalgic ideals and illusions about past havens inform those books which allow a future, and underpin those which deny the possibility of hope in an awful present" (p. 41).

Scutter’s book received criticism in a letter to the editor published in *The Australian Book Review* by another Junior Fiction author (Pausacker, 1999). Pausacker was critical of Scutter's lack of methodology. "Her themes are as randomly chosen as her experts" and the size of her sampling ("forty titles is way too small a sample to be considered representative"), in making a judgement about the quality of junior fiction published over the last two decades. Whether or not forty titles is too small a sample to be representative,

the titles she evaluates are well known and well promoted. This suggests that while the sample may be deemed non-representative, it is a sample that could be deemed significant.

Scutter's challenge to influential adults is to consider the nature of contemporary junior fiction, to be attuned to, and to help young people develop an awareness of the multiplicity of factors involved in its creation and promotion.

We need to teach children, teenagers and young adults to be aware of the constructedness of texts, and to learn to resist some of the manipulations of their culture. Not all writers are on the side of the angels.

(Scutter, 1999, p.6)

Winch, Ross Johnston, March, Ljungdahl & Holliday (2004) in presenting their arguments for more systematic teaching of critical literacy practices argue that authors write from their own subconscious ideological positions and that students "need the skills to enable them to resist being manipulated into a particular reader position" (p.343).

In any school year, material arrives promoting writing festivals, in-service days, author visits, teaching materials and potential student texts. The advantages in nurturing the educational market, both for the author and the publishing company is obvious. Publishing companies have tuned into the prevailing socio-political agenda and tailored their marketing accordingly. An in-service day called "Boys and Books" might actually be a day where attending teachers are primarily entertained by four of the company's stable of male junior fiction writers who do indeed have an interest in the concept of boys reading more books. Attendees will be offered the opportunity to purchase author signed copies of the books for their libraries, book school visits by authors, or order sets of class texts.

Before any of this interaction with schools, publishing choices have been made that may well have to do with economic rather than literary imperatives. Bakhtin's 500-year-old example aptly illustrates the subtleties of cultural encoding that have occurred as a result of publishing choices. "The printing of books played an extremely important role in the history of the chivalric romance" because, at the end of the 15th century and beginning of

the 16th century, printed editions of almost all the courtly romances that had been created up to that time emerged (Bakhtin, 1981). With hindsight, we may well learn more about the processes privileging particular texts at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century.

Supporting the book industry is a system of awards offered by the Children's Book Council. These awards are highly valued by authors because, as well as the recognition they provide, the results have a huge impact on sales. The awards receive varying media coverage and attention in schools and libraries. Each year a number of books in a range of categories is short-listed. In August, the winner of each section is announced. In the school in which this research took place, every student has a library session in which they are introduced to the short-listed books. The librarians read excerpts, talk about other books by the authors and generally encourage students to read the books and reach their own verdict. Some teachers follow up with activities in their own classes.

Each year this school also invites an author to speak with the students. In selecting students to attend, priority is given to those studying a book by the particular author and of course timetabling dictates which other classes attend, most often, students from the younger levels. Occasionally, an individual teacher will organise a day out to a Youth Literature Day.

Youth Literature Days are one of the initiatives of the Australian Council for Youth Literature where groups of students from many schools listen to a group of authors read from, and talk about their work. They are a response to the perceived hunger of "large numbers of young people...for contact with authors, for information about books, for contact with other like-minded souls and for the opportunity to revel in all that literature has to offer (Nieuwenhuizen & Thompson, 1994, p. 321).

There has been some criticism of this trend towards such an author centred focus of reading and writing. In 1990, Lodge drew attention to what he described as "the obsessively author centred reception of reading and writing" (p. 15). The practice of school visits from authors is receiving some scrutiny (Clarke, 2004). As schools adapted to practices of process writing (Graves, 1983, Atwell, 1987, Gleeson & Prain, 1996) with its emphasis on writing like real writers, the practice of author visits, with a view to

students learning from the experts, was established. The phenomenon of author visits to schools (most often, supported by publishing companies) has flourished.

This brief overview of the additional economic and cultural features of the adolescent literature phenomenon is designed to show how influences other than educational ones, are competing to influence what happens in schools. It is not within the scope of this thesis to undertake detailed scrutiny of these processes, but rather to acknowledge that these forces exist and to see them as part of the contextual framework within which contemporary set text study exists.

2.5 Prevailing educational culture

Current curriculum documents and assessment criteria reflect the values and language of the market driven, economic rationalist culture of the 1980s and 1990s in which the needs of business and industry became primary goals of the education system (Apple, 1993). The reality of altered priorities for schools can be seen in staff cuts, higher teaching loads, increased class sizes, fewer school support staff, increasing curriculum demands, fear of litigation and the requirements to document individual students' progress in a way that has never been asked before. Against this background, the outward symbols of teaching indicate that teaching and learning have become a very pragmatic business. This contrasts with and was clearly a reaction to the freer and more individual centred culture of the 1960s and 70s.

Government reports from the early 1990s (Dawkins, 1990; Finn Review, 1991) which focussed on functional aspects of literacy legitimised the push towards a utilitarian view of the subject English. It is not surprising that in the focus on outcomes and accountability and therefore curriculum documentation, assessment procedures, reporting procedures and individual learning pathways, that the types of books being studied within the English curriculum have not received much attention at all. Ability to measure outcomes has become a significant factor in determining curriculum. This is a point more thoroughly discussed in the work of Murphy (1996), Luke (1997) and Zajda (2001).

Luke (1997) sees the literacy based competency movement (Collins, 1993: Harris, Guthrie, Hobart & Lundberg, 1995) as a push towards valuing what is able to contribute directly to productivity and the expansion of capital with the direct consequence of linking literacy to employment levels. He challenges the easy acceptance of this myth with its inherent tendency to place the problems at the “doorstep of educators whose institutions and practices are described as at the heart of the problem” (1997, p. 11). Murphy has identified the “competencies movement” as originating in Thatcher’s England when education was becoming more closely linked to industry as a way of dealing with unemployment. In Australia, she saw the effect as increasingly anti-intellectual in its reductionist view of knowledge, and damaging in its removal of trust from teaching practitioners (Murphy, 1996).

Supporting the economic position is a political imperative to keep students at school for longer than has previously been the case. Alongside this directive has been the recognition of individual learning styles. The result is that schools are being required to provide for a wider range of students than ever before, many of whom would not be at school if employment were available to them. While this spread of needs and abilities has increased the demands on schools, so too have the demands to operate within the symbolic and sometimes actual business structure of the market place.

Joseph Zajda has argued that it is not just economic rationalism that has changed the way we view education. “Today, economic rationalism and neo-conservative ideology, has become a dominant ideology, in which education is seen as a producer of goods and services that foster economic growth” (Zajda, 2001). As such, subjects such as English need to be justified in terms of what they can offer the global economy rather than what they might offer the individual. In the same article, Zajda quoted the American educational thinker Maxine Greene (p 2) who challenged the limitations offered by the dominant discourse of the last two decades. She argued that educational research in the 21st century ought to be “focussed on a greater role for imagination and metaphorical thinking, and a greater openness to the visions of human possibility” (p.2). It is in the realm of imagination and thinking and amidst questions of human possibility that this research is set.

This chapter has shown some of the ways outside forces can affect a school curriculum. In spite of the cultural, economic and business shifts outlined, the English curriculum in most schools has remained literature based. The discussion highlights some of the less obvious factors which have the potential for influencing the types of texts and textual activities used in the main component of the English curriculum, set text study.

The imposed requirements in terms of curriculum, assessment and reporting documentation, the value attributed to the teaching of English as indicated by the school's resource distribution, and the cultural patterns that are reflected in such things as gender employment patterns and workloads are unlikely to be identified by students as part of their experience. None-the-less, it is imperative that the findings of this research are read within this contextual framework.

Chapter 3: Theoretical perspectives on reading

3.1 Introduction

A study such as this, which seeks to gain entry into the conceptual world of student readers, demands the kind of questioning that inevitably leads to an overview of the way reading has been perceived. In this chapter, I am setting out some key viewpoints on how reading has been theorized. Doing this, allows for an exploration of some of the positions that have unfolded as others have sought to understand the reading process.

In Chapter 2, having explained the concept of set text, I drew attention to some of the salient cultural, political and economic features which less directly contribute to the construct of set text. While there is not scope to explore the theory in each of these fields, it is important to recognize the complicity of evolving theoretical positions from various fields.

This third chapter has been structured into two main sections. In the first, I have presented a theoretical overview by selecting some key theorists whose work informs the beliefs which have lead to the present practices. These underlie the students' experiences of set text study and have influenced my thinking in structuring this thesis. This allows me to explain why I am straddling key theoretical positions in this research. While my understanding of reading theory and effective classroom practice is clearly influenced by postmodern thought, I am allowing for the possibility of more power in a text than is attributed to postmodern positions. In the second part of this chapter, I have moved from examining the way theoretical positions have affected our notions of reading to an examination of the reading processes which occur in school settings as reported by other contemporary researchers. My understanding of the process of set text reading is pivotal to the way I have structured the research and to the conclusions I am able to draw from this research.

Pertinent to the focus of this study, and the process of making judgements about text study, is the understanding that it is not possible to circumvent theory. In rejecting one

theory we accept others. In what might seem obvious or understood, we are “drawing upon concepts which were once problematic and unfamiliar” (Selden, 1993 p. 3). Several contemporary researchers have written of their journey in coming to recognise that they were not moving to a theoretical position from a non-theoretical position but rather moving from one theoretical position to another (Purves, 1978; Sarland, 1991; Wilhelm 1997). In his most recent book, *After Theory* (2003) Eagleton posits that those who have struggled through the latter years of last century waiting for it to all go away, will now have to contend with the new theories which are being changed with the world they reflect upon. He sees the inevitability of this as intrinsic to the domains in which we work; that part of the training of those who work in the fields of art and literature “is to imagine alternatives to the actual” (p. 39).

3.2 Theoretical perspectives behind the construct of set text

Evolving literary theory has changed the way we think about the nature of text and the act of reading, as well as the classroom practices we employ. This overview highlights the dominant theories which have influenced classroom practice. Inevitably though, in the conduct of the research and writing of this thesis, I am subconsciously engaging in the exact process of suppression and privilege which in this thesis I am seeking to elucidate.

Set text study has evolved from an essentialist view of literature which dominated English universities in the 19th century. This essentialist view advocated by the critic F. R. Leavis, held that the literature itself was worthy (Norris, 1991). The notion of “the canon” developed (Wilhelm, 1997; Macey 2000 p. 56), giving further credibility to the concept of great Western literature which permeated the thinking of English departments in universities and schools. Barry (2002) has argued that practicality reinforced the acceptability of the canon in that a series of classic texts fitted comfortably into a year-long syllabus (p. 3). The concept of “the canon” linguistically and socially has ensured the text is seen as a powerful object. Accordingly, values of worth and power to transform were accorded to the literature text itself. This thinking dominated towards the latter part of the 19th century when the Australian school curriculum evolved. Although the theorists known as deconstructionists (Derrida being the principal theorist) challenged this view in the middle of last century, the dominance of essentialist thinking is still evident in many

aspects of the way texts are dealt with in schools today (Green & Le Bihan, 1996). Eagleton, one of the most influential literary theorists throughout this period articulated the need he saw for deconstructing the concept of the canon.

Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties does not exist...the so called 'literary canon'. The unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature' has to be recognised as a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time.

(Eagleton, 1983, p.11)

More than twenty years on, it would seem that in many schools the challenge posed by Eagleton and others has been either unheard or unheeded. In the particular school in which this study takes place, the notion of cultural worth of canonical literature is voiced in staff discussions. Teachers are encouraged to choose one of their Year 10-11 set texts from the selection of "classics" held in the library.

Whereas, according to the continental existentialist or post-structuralist view that gained prominence in the latter half of last century, existence was more important than essence. Post-structuralism as a theory sought to question the notions of fixed meanings and absolute truths (Winch et al. 2003 p. 343). Within this post-structural way of thinking was an attempt to show how people arrived at their position and how privileged ideas and concepts became linguistically encoded. This view provided a direct challenge to the way literature was being taught and studied, as it provided a way forward for people to see literature in its production and in its reception, as a social and historical construction. The manifestation of this altered way of thinking can be seen in schools through critical literacy practices (Comber, 1993; Robinson & Robinson, 2003; Winch et al. 2004, 352-360) which attend to the awareness of, and resistance to, inherent textual ideological positioning. Critical literacy evolved from Marxist and Feminist theoretical positions which sought to provide emancipatory knowledge (Crotty, 1998, p. 159). By adopting critical literacy practices, students are taught to recognise ways that as readers they are being positioned.

Foucault was one of the first French post-structuralists to be accepted into an American university, Berkeley. This meant his work was published in English and accordingly, was

disseminated throughout the English-speaking world, resulting in the spread of postmodern thought with its inevitable effect on literature and eventually on the practices involving the use of literature in schools.

Of particular relevance to this type of qualitative research, based on personal interview and featuring a reporting style privileging the words of the respondents, is both an awareness of the way we construct knowledge and the way we use language to represent that knowledge. Much of Foucault's work centred on an analysis of construction; of how construction occurs within the limits of historical thought. His early work on 'madness' showed the ways in which it was experienced, imagined and dispersed in society. Later he moved on to write about language in a similar way showing that it also should be subject to examination in the way any social construct could be (Thody and Read, 1998).

The key question resulting from deconstruction hinges on the concept of power. "Whose interests are being served by a particular construction?" permeates the English and Social Science curriculum of schools today. The language of contemporary curriculum incorporates terms such as 'discourse' and 'text' which Foucault made popular. The adoption of these terms is an exemplar of the power of language, both to disturb and alienate. While they are derived from a movement focussed on disrupting power structures encoded in language, expressions of exclusion and alienation (Watson, 2003) suggest that they have contributed to another form of suppression where members of school communities feel less able to participate in school dialogue (Bantick, 2004). Some of the limitations and the potential of the way language is specifically used in this thesis are explained in Chapter 5 (5.10.1, 5.10.2 & 5.10.3).

In some ways, the methodology of this research in the seeking of student responses to particular features from a set of texts could be seen as replicating an essentialist position (Barry, 2002). It works from a premise of *content* and implies a finite system of reading responses, rather than an infinitely varied textual phenomenon. However part of the purpose of this process of identification, that of seeking to recognise what is not present, hints at the sort of analysis conducted by Derrida. In reworking Saussure's theory of binary oppositions, he tried to show that in privileging one term of meaning, another was suppressed (Green and LeBihan, 1996, p.215-216). By examining ideologies represented by the absence or presence of textual features, other perhaps subtler, ideologies may

become even more hidden. A fundamental, and in the case of this study, pertinent notion espoused by Derrida is that of “the complicity of the critic in the process of deconstruction, the way in which any writer is bound up in the forms that he or she seeks to challenge” (Green and LeBihan, 1996, p. 218). I have worked to understand the students’ experience of set text study including their specific response to the presence or absence of particular textual features. However, my own questioning is privileging concepts I consider worthy of scrutiny while others are suppressed by my lack of awareness, and others, consciously dismissed because of the limited size of the study. At times the potential for exploring an idea may have been suppressed because I used linguistic terms which are not part of the students’ discourse. Both the student readers and I come to the research out of our own linguistic positions formed through our social, political, economic and cultural conditioning. Patterson et al’s (1994) proposal that to think of readers as discursively located “subjects” is useful in recognising that “subjectivity... is a product of social relations and discursive regimes” (p. 65). This position is helpful both in attending to the primacy of social relationships and language choices in the construction and the reading of qualitative research. The students, thesis readers and I, each bring to the research our own linguistic positioning which stems from meanings we have had access to in our own patterns of social cultural economic and political experience.

Initially I identified a number of textual features as a focus for students’ response, and then, as I became more realistic about what was possible, limiting these to two representations; adult characters and suicide. I saw these features as clues to the ideological positions of the texts. In recent years, teachers have become more attuned to the way ideological positioning occurs, not just through obvious textual positioning but through gaps and narrative style. Although I have been quite explicit in my concern about students’ experience of set text study, I wanted to know if students saw themselves as being positioned towards a particular view of adults or the act of suicide. My interest in the cumulative experience stems from wondering about students’ perception of repeated textual features or textual gaps either in the texts and/or the set text study units. So while, the position I have taken allows for the concept of textual power, this thesis is firmly placed in the poststructuralist tradition of embracing the concept of intertextuality and multiple discourses.

In looking at these pluralistic positions of reading, the work of Bakhtin is particularly useful. Mikhail Bakhtin, was a Russian theorist whose work was suppressed for most of his life. Bakhtin's basic principle was that communicative acts only have meaning or "take on their specific force or weight, in particular situations or contexts" (Dentith, 1995, p. 3). Dentith argued that Bakhtin's own literary life was a salient example of this because his works could not be published either where or when they were written. "When they were published in the West, they issued into specific situations which lent them the force of other expectations and agendas" (p. 3). The obvious parallel for this study is that the act of reading for the students is occurring either in a class or as an associated school activity in the context of the expectations of contemporary curriculum design, social and academic demands. The act of research also occurs in a contrived situation with a particular set of expectations. The particular meaning that a student chooses to report might be different in other reading or reporting contexts.

Bakhtin wrote of the concept of the "author's creative reaction" in his 1920s essay *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* "...form is not pure expression of the hero and his life, but an expression which, in giving expression to the hero, also expresses the author's relationship to the hero, and it is this relationship that constitutes the specifically aesthetic moment of form" (Dentith, 1995, p.12). By the 1930s, Bakhtin had also written of the historical formation of an author's consciousness. From there he moved to a discussion of the notions we have come to regard as characteristic of deconstruction, namely a recognition of the plurality of voices in text. It is a notion that was articulated by Kristeva in the term "intertextuality", recognising that a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation. "It is always involved in a dialogue with other texts" (Macey, 2000, p.203). These connections are both overt and covert, but the significance of the concept is that while these intersections allow for reinterpretation, intertextuality "gathers... a new meaning that is beyond that of its original and beyond the bare bones of the new retelling"(Winch et al. 2004, p.395). By promoting the work of Bakhtin, Kristeva was able to develop and promote this notion of intertextuality (Holquist, 1990). It is a concept that has become incorporated into the language and processes of English teaching in schools and is crucial to the way we evaluate the meaning-making that occurs for student readers.

It was in his work on Dostoevsky's novels, that Bakhtin developed the concept of dialogism for which he has become renowned. By recognising the polyphony of voices, he refuses to privilege one voice over another, the novel "ought not to give priority to one dominant voice, attitude or idea" (p 46). Holquist (1990) presented dialogism as centering on the belief in the relativity of meaning, that the meaning occurs as a result of the relationship of two bodies inhabiting different space simultaneously.

David Lodge, a British cultural theorist, put his understanding of the importance of Bakhtin's work in this context.

If in the small world of literary criticism, the 1960s was the decade of structuralism and the 1970s was the decade of deconstruction and the other varieties of post-structuralism, then the 1980s have arguably been dominated by the discovery and dissemination of Mikhail Bakhtin's work.

(Lodge, 1990, p. 4).

It is because Bakhtin re-emphasized the elements of "communication" and "value" that Lodge (1990, p. 4) saw this work as offering a hopeful position to those who were left floundering after the era of deconstruction. For this thesis, his position offers justification for attending to notions of the potential power of the text. In terms of the breadth of the questioning of the position of author, Lodge pondered whether Bakhtin's greatest contribution had been to reaffirm "the writer's creative and communicative power" (p. 7).

It is these complementary Bakhtinian views which are useful for this research. Bakhtin acknowledged the power of the multiple discourses, including that of author, participants in the dialogue, and the act of communication. This provides a rationale for investigating the diversity of student views as they report on their experience of encountering text, author, peer and teacher readers, and learning tasks in their day-to-day experience of set text study.

Stanley Fish, an American theorist argued a similar position in regard to the recipient community of a particular communication. In 1980, his aptly named work, *Is There a Text in this Class?* was released. In it, he claimed, "it is interpretive communities rather than

either the text, or the reader, that produces meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features” (Fish, 1980, p 14).

Fish moved to the position where he considered the group of people who interacted communally with a text to produce another entity, as having the power in textual interpretation, hence his sub-title, *The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. While this perspective is widely held, and in fact is adopted as the basis for the student focus of this study, I am to some extent in my research, challenging the notion that seems to put so little, if any value, on the text itself. Scholes challenged Fish’s concept of interpretive communities on the basis of whether or not choice exists in forming that community. He makes the point that a person may choose a theoretical position of feminism but is part of the black community by necessity (Scholes, 1989, pp. 92-93). It is a point worthy of consideration in this research where the students have been placed in, rather than chosen, the particular group which has the potential to become the interpretive community. Patterson et al (1994, p.65) have criticised the concept because they feel it argues for a specific group meaning rather than multiple individual meanings. The structure of this research and part of the justification for such an intense examination of the experience of a small number of individual students is based on the acceptance of the individualistic experience of reading even though it is placed in a compulsorily shared reading situation. Research completed in Canada by Mackey and Johnston is based on a similar principle of recognising the individual reading within the more overt classroom environment

In the contemporary classroom, the variety and complexity of the texture of the group can both dazzle and overwhelm. But we must never forget that each person actually reads privately, internally and invisibly, and that the group picture, in a very real way, always contains the aggregation of the individual close-ups.

(Mackey & Johnston, 1994, p. 31)

In his essay, “*What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?*” Fish reported on the arguments which have ensued as scholars have studied the work of Blake’s, “The Tyger”. He used the fact that scholars have differed so completely in their interpretation of meaning, to advance his argument for the authority of the interpretation, rather than the text itself. But of course, no one was arguing that “the tyger” doesn’t exist. The reality that neither teachers nor parents nor literary theorists can control or create a student’s interpretation or

response to a text, does not diminish the value of examining the group of texts, their ideology, the way they are used and the response students have to them.

My view is supported by the work of Todorov who rejected the notion that the reader alone supplies the meaning of text. He pointed to the social nature of language, the use of dictionaries, enjoyment of language devices which work because of our shared understanding (1988, p 187). He rejected the notion of relying solely on interpretive communities, such as the class group. He argued for the place of thinking which allows people to believe “that literary works have some relation to the world and that some values are better than others, that some are even worth fighting for” (1988, p.187).

Furthermore, he cited the work of Scholes, to give support to his position. Scholes argued for the restoration of the "judgemental dimension to criticism, not in the trivial sense of ranking literary texts, but in the most serious sense of questioning the values proffered by the texts we study" (Todorov, 1988 p.190). Todorov objected to the view that if the text itself does not carry the meaning, then an author is free of ethical restraint. It was precisely the rejection of this notion which fuelled one of Australia’s biggest and most recent “literary debates”. The furore surrounding the Demidenko/Darville affair in which Helen Darville was discovered to have not been the Ukrainian author Helen Demidenko as she represented herself, suggests that the Australian community rejects the notion of an author not needing to attend to whether or not they are right, but “merely interesting” (Todorov, 1988 p.186). Calls for the resignation of the Miles Franklin Judging Panel suggest that the general community places a very high value on authorial integrity (Steger, 2000, p. 9).

In the American journal, *Researching in the Teaching of English*, several of the contributors contested the notion of the text being peripheral to the meaning and values inherent in the text. One of the editorial contributors, Martin, argued that “if texts are not included in the analysis of discourse, educators will not see ways in which patterns of social interaction are enacted in the reading and production of texts” (2000, p. 103). This is precisely one of the concerns underlying this research. In the same journal, Faust argued against what he sees as “dualistic conceptions of readers and texts that falsely separate the two” (2000, p.104). His view supports the premise of the proposed

methodology and the research questions of this thesis, in not taking a dualistic approach to text and context. Rather, he is urging a recognition of the interplay of both.

Many questions have been posed by literary theory: "Where is the text?" "Does the text have meaning in itself?", "Is the meaning created by the reader?", "Is there a text in this class?" (Fish, 1980), "Do the problems of criticism reduce themselves to a question of taste or predisposition?" (Selden, 1988. p. 2) "Does critical theory relieve the author of having to be right, just interesting?" (Todorov, 1988, p.186) "Is the author a temporary construction for the period of creation?" (Lodge, 1990, p.15). In spite of such questions, it is clear that a substantial body of literature, while emphasising the notion of context, does recognise the potential power of text. This recognition gives credibility to seeing the text as an integral facet of the experience of intertextuality which I am seeking to understand.

3.3 *The act of reading set texts*

In the earlier part of this chapter I have outlined the way post-structuralism has affected our understanding of reading practices and has contributed to some dimensions of set text study. In this section I show how contemporary researchers have contributed to my understanding of the reading process and how this applies particularly to the way I have structured this research on set text school reading.

In explaining how this research evolved from my developing fears about my own seemingly disengaged students, I am like others (Pradl, 1996; Wilhelm, 1997; Sumara, 2002; Kettel & Douglas, 2003) accepting the notion of engagement as a measure of a successful reading. In using the term engagement, I am describing the process of being responsive to literary texts. I see an engaged reader as one who displays "a conscious sense of the reader as a meaning-maker" Wilhelm, 1997 p.30). I have alluded to the engagement I have experienced as a reader and the motivation this provides in my teaching. In this study, I am asserting that a measure of engagement is paramount in considering whether or not my best hopes or worst fears regarding students envisaging literary representations as possibilities for their own lives have any foundation.

In the light of these arguments, Rosenblatt's work is of specific relevance to Victorian teachers of English who generally did their academic training in the 1970s. Her early influential work, "Literature as Exploration" was published initially in 1938 and republished in 1968. "The Reader, the Text, the Poem" was published in 1978. These texts have continued to be a key reference in the examination of beliefs about reading and reading practices in schools. In these texts, she opened the way for the dominance of reader response theory. This acknowledged the role of the reader, engaged in "intense personal activity" (1968, p.viii), to enable the meaning-making that was occurring in the reading process. Practical orientations in implementing a reader-response theory provided further impetus to the challenge to traditional classroom practices based on essentialist thinking (Purves, 1978). While later writings elaborated her beliefs on the direct effect reading could have on a society, the key notion of the relationship between reader and text has remained pivotal in her thinking.

As early as the 1960s, she was urging teachers to reject older notions of "the didactic, moralistic approach to literature. Wise teachers have opposed any tendency to make of literature a mere handmaiden of the social studies or a body of documents illustrating moral points" (1968, p. 4). Rather she proposed that teachers should "seek to develop the student's sensuous endowment so that he may gain from life and literature the greatest measure of enjoyment and sound, colour and rhythm" (p. 50). Her belief in the value of providing space and context for the individual to freely be influenced by the text informed her beliefs about the way reading is done in schools which in turn informed a great number of current teachers of English who completed their training in the 1970s.

Although I discovered Wilhelm's work after the research structuring process, I found his close examination of the reading processes of his own students pivotal in the development of my thinking about adolescent reading. Wilhelm, wrote as one "at the coalface", a practising classroom teacher. He has built his theories from Rosenblatt's (1968) distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading, put simply, between reading for information and reading for pleasure. In *You Gotta Be the Book* (1997), Wilhelm documented how his professional practice changed from a content-based approach to one where he desperately wanted to engage every student in the experience of reading. His research stemmed from his frustration with trying to engage his most reluctant readers in what was for himself a passion. He found some solutions through an initial research

project involving three of his highly engaged readers where he examined what they were doing in an attempt to work out what less engaged readers were not doing. In then listening to the talk about books from all his students, he was able to see that the visualisation and textual gap-filling that were automatic processes for highly engaged readers were not part of the process for less engaged readers. Having identified such a significant processing gap, Wilhelm used techniques from drama and art to help students fill in these gaps.

Attitudes towards re-reading shed some light on the activity of reading. While re-reading is acknowledged as a concept in the literature of reading, few researchers have written on the practice. Protherough is an exception. In his article, *Read it Once, Read it Twice*, Protherough (1994, p.110) quoted from small-scale school-based enquiries which found that the majority of eleven to fifteen year olds claim to like reading a story more than once. Protherough found that whether or not the pleasure of re-reading existed for a student seemed to be tied up with their expectations of what constituted reading. Their attitudes embodied different views of the reading process, as active engagement with the text creating a unique response each time or as a mechanical translation of a text's given message (Protherough, 1994, p115).

Sumara has argued for close reading and sustained reading to enable insight to occur. It is his understanding that through re-reading a reader develops a "focal practice" (p. 150). This interpretative event requires attention to detail and is likely to further insight when the experience of reading and re-reading a text is shared. It is his understanding of his own re-reading practices which informs his beliefs about its value in shared reading situations (2002, pp.19-25). Set text study carries within it the assumption of both re-reading and shared reading. I wanted to understand how students viewed these practices.

In their study on teenage reading practices Manuel and Robinson (2002) found that "over 55% of boys had read their favourite book more than once, with an astonishing 32% having read their favourite book 4 or more times" (p.73). It would seem that many Australian teenagers have discovered the pleasure of re-reading that others of us have taken much longer to realise (Sumara, Davis & Luce-Kapler, 2000, p.235).

Meditative texts such as *Protocols of Reading* (Scholes, 1989) and *Why Literature in Schools Still Matters* (Sumara, 2002) allow the reader to see personal reflections placed alongside reflections on social and cultural acts of reading. This integrated reflection is paramount to an examination of student experience of school reading where the private and public acts of reading are less distinct. The distinction between a private and public act of reading is an important one as is suggested by the Sumara title *Private Readings in Public* (1996). However it is also important to recognise the ways in which these acts of reading merge.

Scholes has been greatly influenced by Derridean thought, accepting that a read text becomes part of the web of textuality, and, sharing his frustration in knowing there are certain “protocols to reading” (1989, p. ix) but not knowing exactly what these are. Scholes has used linear and circular metaphors to explain his understanding of the essential movement linking the physical text with the textual situation of the reader (p.7-8). His reflections on the position of text within textuality and the activity of textuality are helpful in thinking through the way set texts are experienced. While accepting the existence of the reading act outside the text, the text is still instrumental in becoming part of that textuality. “We cannot enter the texts we read, but they can enter us ... We are never outside the whole web of textuality in which we hold our cultural being and in which every text awakens echoes and harmonies” (Scholes, 1989, p.6).

In examining the act of reading within the classroom, Mackey and Johnston (1994) reiterate the important distinction between private and public readings, making it quite explicit in regard to educational settings. While one might hope to get closer to an understanding of a student’s experience of reading, the research process is already moving the reading to a more public event. Similarly they argued individuals read texts. Within classes individuals are asked to discuss, respond and write. These events have a public dimension and must inevitably occur at some time later than the private reading event. This distinction matters because while my study seeks to understand the individual reading experience of each of the students, it seeks to understand the meaning-making which occurs as a result of the private and public components of the classroom reading experience.

3.4 Literature as an agent of transformation

The concept of literature having the intrinsic capacity to transform an individual is so effectively embedded in the thinking of why reading matters, that the issue is hardly debated in educational or literary circles. Even the use of the term ‘transformation’ which is used so widely without clarification points to the acceptance of the concept. This capacity though does tend to be thought of as linked to the essentialist thinking of previous generations when it was believed that books held intrinsic value or truth. Consequently the term as it is generally used, denotes a positive connotation. Its use in this thesis refers to the possibility of any change that might occur in an individual. The question being asked is whether or not students perceive particular representations as contributing to their emerging identity.

Morgan and Misson (2004) provide a helpful discussion on seeing how this thinking sits comfortably with the poststructuralist beliefs behind the theoretical understanding of intertextuality that underpins this research. They argue that it is necessary to examine the concept of subjectivity, a position we readily accept in terms of the way we are placed as readers of books. But they challenge the general assumption that a single text might add an overlay to a pre-existing identity. Rather they propose that we consider the way we are discursive subjects, that our “subjectivity is simply built up by our participation in a range of discourses” (Morgan and Misson, 2004) not necessarily, though, as a coherent whole but an identity which at different times allows the dominance of different subjectivities. This “theory of the discursive construction of subjectivity” provides an interesting argument in understanding the research sub-questions on emerging identity. On one level, it challenges the idea of students travelling towards a single adult identity, but on another level, it gives weight to the concern that the ideology of the set texts might be speaking powerfully to a particular subjectivity or resonating disturbingly or powerfully with other textual experiences.

3.4.1 Children and authors

Many writers acknowledge the possibility of transformation in their readers and others reflect on the profound effects different books have had on themselves. There is less published from the perspective of younger readers. Graham Greene certainly recognised the possibility of transferring values through literature. "As children listen to stories, as they take down books from library shelves, they may as Graham Greene suggests in *The Lost Childhood* be choosing their future and the values that will dominate it" (Plowden Report Section 595 p.5 in Saxby 1997). Elizabeth Jolley claimed that a "fiction writer has the opportunity to offer people something entertaining but at the same time, might be able to change a person's outlook on life or their direction, perhaps towards the more loving and optimistic..." (1992). In commenting on seeing a musical adaptation of one of her own stories, *The Great Gilly Hopkins: Rebel with a Cause*, Katherine Paterson internationally acclaimed children's author, said it was like reading her own book for the first time. "I laughed, I cried...it changed my life" (Hanzl, 1998, p. 21). In reflecting on his life, in an interview with Louise Bellamy, Australian writer Alex Miller, claimed that the reading of Francis Ratcliffe's *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* "marked the most important turning point of his life" (Bellamy, 2000, p.7).

In the introduction to *Dear author: Students write about books that changed their lives* (1995), Lowry reflected on the different books which meant so much at different stages of her life in an imaginary letter. "Dear Harper Lee, Thankyou for writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I became Scout when I read the book and I have been Scout ever since. She (and you) taught me about innocence and honor." When Lowry wrote, "Dear Author" is not just a "salutation. It's a whisper that touches on a love affair. We should listen to it with envy and with awe", she was identifying the thing that has driven so many teachers to want to be English teachers: to have students share that relationship with books (Agee, 1988; Pidduck, 2001) and sometimes, the possibility of transformation.

"Dear Author" is full of accounts from young people of books that "changed their lives." One 14 year old, Kathleen Niblett wrote to Carl Lewis "the warm honest sharing of your experiences (*Inside Track*) has given me the courage to go beyond pain and frustration" (P.5). Another 14 year old, Mary Muse wrote to J D Salinger. "I have done a lot of

standing up for myself, and it isn't always easy. Going against the flow isn't always fun when you're the only one. Thank you Mr Salinger for giving me another friend in Holden Caulfield". Such identification with key characters was a recurring theme of these letters. Others spoke of how books had provided an escape or helped them move on through grief, family breakdown, drug use or given them a new understanding.

These viewpoints are valuable to this research, affirming the importance of knowing what particular books have meant to young readers, and also highlighting the relationships of author and reader, a contextual feature that may well influence a student's reading of a particular text.

3.4.2 The teacher's perspective

Literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers.

(Rosenblatt)

A survey of the literature on teaching clearly shows teacher support for the concept of potential transformation through reading. It illuminates the beliefs of educators and others in the possibilities of literature. It is these beliefs which inform teaching practice and curriculum direction. The discussion on teacher's perceptions of appropriate texts (see 4.3) illustrates the underlying belief that books have the capacity to change students. The literature provides many examples of teachers recognising this possibility of transformation in their student readers.

Charles Sarland (1991) has reported on a number of British researchers who have examined teachers' objectives in teaching literature. Malcolm Yorke found that teachers saw literature as fostering understanding, tolerance, moral standards, love of the beautiful and as offering insight into the relationship between humankind and nature. The work of Douglas and Dorothy Barnes and Stephen Clark confirms Yorke's findings. They identified five versions of English, one of them being the version which "seeks to change" (Sarland, 1991 p. 6).

Sarland himself reported that teachers saw reading as “relaxing and yet also cathartic”. Interestingly, it was the notion of "enjoyment of reading” which he identified as the central concern uniting primary, middle and secondary teachers (Sarland 1991, p. 5). One focus of Sarland's own study was on text choice; he wanted to find out why teachers chose the set texts they did. While for reasons outlined, the process of choosing the set texts is not part of this study, what teachers do with texts will be intrinsically linked to their initial choice of texts. Two of the six categories Sarland created to collate the given teacher responses indicate significantly value laden categories. His work provides insights into teachers’ preoccupations in choosing texts. Reasons given for choice of texts included books chosen "because of their quality" and books chosen "because they furthered the transmission of high culture" (p 6). Another category, books chosen because of "teachers' personal predilections" may well have included teachers' constructs of 'worth'.

Sarland acknowledged that in his early teaching, he had firmly embraced the Leavisite tradition. "I firmly believed that if only the mass of the population would read English literature then their sensibilities would be suitably trained and the world would be a better place." (Sarland, 1991, p. 16) In elaborating on the deconstruction of his own views, he still wanted "to insist on the quality" of what he read.

The writing of Jack Thomson, an influential Australian researcher whose work also meshes literary theory and teaching practice reflected his passionate efforts to understand and improve the reading process so that students could experience the success as well as the enjoyment to be had from books. He clearly believes in the extension of experience provided by reading. "Literature certainly seems to extend our range of emotional experience through empathy (1987 p. 68). Like Sarland, Sumara, van der Hoevan and others, he reported on his own reading practices to elucidate his theoretical and practical position. In reflecting on his reading of *The Raj Quartet*, which he enjoyed so much, he found it "difficult to put down" (p.67). He wrote: "I have emerged from my experience with a greater understanding of what is meant by nobility, loyalty, self-knowledge and moral consciousness, and with a greater awareness of the range of manifestations of these values and their opposites in daily life" (p. 69).

While the notion of transformation is pivotal to the subtext of the research question, Scholes by quoting Derrida reminds us of our lack of ability to control the reading experience a student has. “Reading is transformational... But this transformation cannot be executed however one wishes”. Scholes’ reiteration of the position that it is the text that enters the textuality of the reader’s life, not the other way around (Scholes, 1989) is an important concept in the reading of research such as Xiangshu’s.

Seeing literature as an agent of transformation is not exclusive to western ways of thinking. Xiangshu Fang (2001) has documented the patterns of cultural, political and social thinking that have directed the dissemination of children’s reading materials in China. He described the sorts of books available at different periods of Chinese history and ascribed either values or political ideology to these. He identified the core moral message of Confucian times as filial piety (p. 368) whereas in the reading materials from the middle of last century, he identified the political ideology of class hatred (p. 375). He also found that the most frequently employed method of directing children towards abstract concepts such as “warm love” or “loyalty to the motherland” was to encourage the application of brutality and hatred through literary representation (p. 374).

Such an analysis ascribes complete power to the text. It is not within the scope of Xiangshu’s thesis to examine readings (other than his own) of these materials, so while his study suggests enormous confidence in the power of the text to influence, questions of children’s readings of this material remain unanswered. His approach is a direct rejection of post-structural ideas which challenge the authority of the text. The patterns identified clearly indicate that China places a very high value on the text’s potential to transform. While the political movements of China might seem extreme to Westerners, the concept of patterning Xiangshu identified is not dissimilar to that identified by Beavis and others in the discussion on the value-driven patterns of text selection (see 4.3). It is easier to identify passive ideologies in cultures and times dissimilar from our own (Sutherland, 1985).

Xiangshu is obviously critical of the perceived manipulative role assumed by Chinese writers.

Chinese writers for children see themselves as the engineers of the soul and children's books are regarded as the tool for moulding and remoulding the soul. These writers cry out to save the children but what they really mean is to save the nation.

(Xiangshu, 2001, p 368)

Such an impassioned claim seems far removed from the persona of children's authors projected through author visits, promotional literature, Writing festivals and Youth Literature Days in Australia. Yet Xiangshu's research points to one of the fundamental principles underlying this research; that passive ideologies ought to be examined (Sutherland, 1985). One dimension of doing this in the school context is to investigate the cumulative experience of set text study rather than single readings of single texts.

It would be too easy to discount what might seem an extreme position of faith in literature to foster such cultural and nationalistic positioning as removed from the Australian position. Yet Beavis's analysis points to a similar belief in the setting of nationalistic texts in the "school readers" from last century (1997). Concerns expressed in more recent decades have emphasised the potential ideological positioning of texts with no positive representations of homosexual fictional characters, inadequate representation of Aboriginal fictional characters and questionable gendered representations of fictional characters. The concerns show an underlying belief in textual power.

Brady's (1994) argument for a particular type of story leaves no doubt as to her position on the potential power of literature. While coming from a very different political perspective from the exponents of particular types of literature in Xiangshu's study, she none-the-less argues that particular forms of narrative are a cultural imperative.

If, as we have argued, everyone lives by stories, then if we are to remain free and hopeful, we need to keep alive those stories of freedom and hope, the stories which open up new possibilities, move us out from the narrow circle of our lives to enter those of others, expand our knowledge and help us see the range of human existence, beautiful, terrible, full of fear and hate, but also full of love generosity and tenderness.

(Brady in Nieuwenhuizen, 1994, 73-74)

In the context of this thesis, the challenge posed by Brady's argument is to find out whether or not we are keeping alive "those stories of freedom and hope" which are most likely to enable and to empower our students, but more significantly, whether or not students perceive themselves as enabled and empowered through their set text study?

In his case study work on the teaching practices employed in the teaching of set novels, Canadian researcher, Sumara also found that in the process of shared scrutiny, teachers started to question the books they were asking students to read (1996, p 166). Sumara found that schools sometimes set books with a view to increasing understanding. However, he concluded that, "although a literary fiction can offer an opportunity for a particular experience, it cannot cause the experience to happen" (1996, p 194).

To demonstrate this, he cited the example of "Ingrid" who because of the increasing racial tensions in the inner city high school in which she taught, chose *The Chrysalids* as the set text. She hoped that her students would "gain a deeper understanding of issues of racism and hatred in their own world by reading the novel" (Sumara 1996, p. 195). However most students were unimpressed with the novel. It became clear that only those students who had been the victim of racial hatred had a strong emotional response to the novel, so that those students, whom Ingrid had hoped to affect, were least affected. "Their historically-affected structures it seems, simply could not admit this new experience" (Sumara, 1996, p. 200).

In *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters* (2002) Sumara argued not only for the place of literature in schools but for "sustained and close relationships with literary texts" in order to generate "deep insight". It is because he sees insight as a necessary step to changing a person's thinking that he has argued so strongly for its importance in the school curriculum. In his teaching Sumara has his students engage in close textual practices because he believes it allows them to have access to the insight of the writers which in turn allows them to make greater sense of their own experience. In attending to the work of developing interpretive reading practices, he has argued that the school is fostering the circumstances for personal insight to occur. He used the metaphor of geographical transformation to describe how shifts in thinking occur, how the evident change is preceded by almost imperceptible small changes.

Patterson (2000) has written in broader terms of the notion of transformation held by teachers. She stated that teachers see this potential for change, not just through the study of literature but also through the study of the subject, English. She directed attention to curriculum documents from early last century which support the same view. Her study of beginning teachers who in the 1990s were articulating ideas of “wanting to change the world” suggests that this is an enduring belief of the profession. She has drawn attention to the extraordinary claims inherent in the titles of English teachers’ conferences such as “Realising the Future”, “Democracy through Language”, “Making a Difference” which reflect and reinforce this belief (Patterson, 2000). It is important that in assessing one component of the English Study, “set text”, that we consider the way broader discussions of the English curriculum reinforce or challenge existing ways of thinking about texts. If, as in the case of the research site in this study, set text study is almost entirely based on novels, such claims could well add weight to existing beliefs on the potential power of literature to transform a reader.

A decade ago, Pride (1994) called on teachers to reconsider the role of literature in moral education. His concern was that post-structuralist readings raise political questions but "fail to put them in the wider context of ethics" and that readers are not provided with "adequate assistance in dealing with questions of this kind" (p. 59). While his focus is different from mine, we are both interested in what is going on in the minds of the readers "within the interpretive community". In his own words, he has described the concerns of his study to be that of "ideas about the nature and the construction of the self as they apply to the reader, the writer and the characters portrayed in texts" (p.59). This certainly resonates with the objectives of my research.

The opening sentence of Gordon Pradl’s text, *Literature for Democracy* clearly validates questions of identity in the context of school reading. It asks “Who do I wish to become? (p. 1) Pradl, as does Sumara, sees reading as allowing the reader to measure oneself or one’s own experience against that of others, “to see beyond our original boundaries” (Pradl, 1996, p.4). Pradl has described reading as a social act of becoming. By implication, his discussion compels us to consider the way stories are used in schools to present particular views of adulthood which students might assume. Whether it is the motivational guest speakers or the activities associated with set texts, particular views of potential adulthood are being presented to students. What students make of these

representations is critical to this research. Enabling students to have access to meanings different from those controlled by others is critical to Pradl's argument as to the processes that need to be enacted in classrooms to ensure democracy.

Misson and Morgan (2004) more recently, are asking important questions about the ideological positioning occurring through the aesthetic. Their understanding of the concept of the aesthetic is a move from the traditional understanding of truth and beauty used in the context of literature to a concept involving process. They argue that there are aspects of the aesthetic, in the text, in the reader and in the negotiation between them. Such explanations while reminding me of the limitations of examining students' responses to particular textual features, is helpful in thinking through issues such as textual engagement.

The aesthetic is an ideological concept in that it constructs a particular way of seeing the world. It is a tool of ideology in that, within texts, it is a powerful force that can create a particular subjectivity in a reader. Thus the aesthetic is not simply a decorative mechanism to engage the reader, but works to position her/him ideologically. The aesthetic creates intense experience that can encompass the rational, but goes beyond it: It is apprehended rather than comprehended.

(Morgan and Misson, 2004)

If this final claim is correct, it is another reason to consider the reported experience of students in the light of conscious and unconscious understanding. While a student reader may report intense levels of literary engagement, they may not be conscious of the seductive processes involved in the engagement. Pride (1994), Pradl (1996) and Morgan & Misson (2004) each remind us of the importance of looking at the processes which accompany set text reading if we are to understand the meaning-making occurring for students. Their positions add weight to the argument for examining classroom practices to ensure that students have access to the greatest range of potential meanings.

Chapter 4: Reading in the secondary classroom

4.1 Classroom perspectives on teaching the set text

Issues surrounding the set text have gained prominence in Australia, through the work of contemporary researchers such as Corcoran, (1994), Ryan, (1999, 2000, 2001) and van der Hoeven, (1998, 2002) and by the earlier work of Thomson (1987). While lamenting the lack of literature on classroom practices in set text study, calling on teachers to examine the thinking behind their teaching practices, and asking how students experience what we're doing, Ryan, (1999, p.15) provides further reasons for doing research such as this study.

In *Reading the Class Novel*, Ryan demonstrated the impact of rapidly changing values on the choice of texts and the way they are used. A text, which was regularly taught a decade ago, is now regarded as "violent and boy-centred" (1999, p 16). In this paper she critiqued the process of text choice and examined the work being done by some of the key international researchers. In *Doing Shakespeare* (2000, p.7), Ryan focussed on the dominance and almost universal acceptance of the value of Shakespeare as a set text. This paper highlights some of the canonical beliefs operating at the decision making level of teaching practice. Her most recent contribution, *Dropping Beatie Bow. How Useful are Set Texts for Teaching English Literacy to Students?* (2001, p.102 ff.), drew together findings from the research study she conducted in 1999 which investigated a range of related issues; text selection, popularity of texts, interest in adolescent issues, the usefulness of texts as a tool for literacy teaching. Ryan reported a positive response from students when the books they studied raised issues of interest to them. Ryan concluded by posing the challenge to schools to assess whether or not the conventional use of "set texts" is meeting the goals of English teaching.

Massey, a teacher from Western Australia, as Head of English in his school, has done exactly as Ryan proposed. In a paper presented at the 2002 Australian Centre for Youth Literature conference, Massey elaborated on how in his school they had abandoned the set text. While he was dealing with a situation of low staff morale and low academic

achievement, it became clear to him that the process of set text based teaching was reinforcing both these situations. He described the move this school made as one from texts to concepts, and “the concept we teach most is critical thinking” (Massey, 2002).

Issues surrounding the set text have featured strongly for a brief period in Australian English teaching journals. While the focus of this study is to examine the experience of studying set texts, related issues are documented in some articles. In 2001, *Stella*, a journal co-produced by the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and The Australian Literacy Educators’ Association featured the issue of the set text.

Pidduck’s article, “We are teaching kids, not subjects” (2001, pp. 95) was presented as the opener of the debate. His angst was raised by the setting of the text “Playing Beattie Bow” for his Year 8 class. While he felt he played the part of trying to enthuse his students, their complete disdain for the text led him to conclude it was an inappropriate choice for a class novel. Interestingly, Pidduck defined the presumed pedagogical goals as “a love of reading and critical literacy”. The reported cause of alienation seemed to be attributed to the language of this novel. Pidduck’s discussion focussed on his call for a more flexible approach to setting texts rather than an analysis of “appropriateness”.

Responses to Pidduck’s article did not take the issues much further except to raise the notion of “collegial support”, “CSF and DEET requirements” (Maher, 2001) and an argument for not abandoning a text that a single individual may deem inappropriate. Such “behind the scenes” controversy is not likely to feature in students’ responses. None the less, it reveals attitudes that contribute to the particular experience of set text study.

Sieta van der Hoevan, a South Australian researcher has undertaken an approach which parallels this study. She too is interested in the classroom experience of set text study. Her data gathering has taken place primarily in classrooms but has had much more to do with the way the class novel is taught. "I wanted to know what teachers do to engage kids with books, specifically adolescent fiction books set as class texts" (1998, p 224). Rather than wanting to know what teachers do, in this research, I was seeking to know what “the kids do”; what they do and what is happening for them when they read and study set texts.

During her research, Van der Hoevan adopted a similar approach to that of the Canadian researcher, Sumara. Both researchers interacted with a group of adult teachers during the time of research noting the way they, as adults, interacted and engaged with the books they were reading. Van der Hoevan was particularly interested in the ideology that drives the practical approach of the teacher in the classroom. "...it is important that teachers recognise and understand the theory behind their own approaches to teaching literature" (1998, p 224). Van der Hoevan conceded that the largest proportion of teachers who, because of their own university training operate out of the Leavisite tradition, are not conscious of the theories behind their teaching practice (1999, p. 1).

In her observation and listening to teachers, Van der Hoevan, as did Sumara in his research, found them deliberately seeking to affect a sympathetic response from their student readers. "Cathy" wanted to teach acceptance of Aboriginal people through the book *Dougy*. "Cathy wants her students to denounce racism, and to feel sympathy for the (mainly Aboriginal) characters." The only judgement Van der Hoevan felt she could make about the students' own meaning making was that, according to the students' drawing of the Moddagadda, there was a great deal of difference either in the students' interpretations or their drawing abilities (1999, p. 7). This is a pertinent reminder of the difficulty of knowing the meaning-making that is occurring for another reader.

Van der Hoevan described "Ann's" attempts, through a variety of interactive and individual activities, to have students understand the ideological positioning going on in the novel. She tried to get them to recognize their own value system so that they could see how their own "view of the world" might affect their interpretation (1998, p 228). These examples from Van der Hoevan's research highlight one of the difficulties in reporting research which Mackey and Johnson (1994) drew attention to. A researcher can only measure reading engagement and responses in limited ways and inevitably always after the event. The response emanating from a class task is quite a step removed from the individual reading act.

Pradl (1994 &1996), who was a key influence on van der Hoevan's work, has built his ideas on Rosenblatt's belief in the worth of enacting democratic processes so that the potential of literature can be realized. Pradl (1996) has argued for democratic practice in the study of texts in the classroom, ("everything from text selection to text meaning" and

including the “discourse of inclusion” rather than “competitive discourse”). He sees this as a contextual requirement for pleasure where students can make the connection with their own knowledge. Significantly, he believes as did Rosenblatt, that democratic processes such as “group effort are supportive of human agency” (p. 81).

Pradl challenges teachers to examine the way classroom activities shape particular responses. Specifically, he argues that teachers need to examine existing power structures, the way conversations happen, what is valued, how the curriculum is structured and when affirmation occurs. This last point links back to the value Pradl places on enjoyment (1994, p 235). If a student is affirmed in their vulnerability of new readings and in the ambiguity of multiple meanings, they will be enabled to do their own exploring rather than feeling that they need to re-deliver the reading of others.

In Sumara’s text, tellingly titled, *Why Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight* (2002), he argued passionately for providing the space (in schools) that is required for deep engagement with books. He specifically identified as important, the inter-generational component of the relationships which are formed around the representation, imagination, and interpretation of knowledge in English classroom settings.

Sumara reported on his own reading experience, both as an individual and as a group member, when he and some teachers who were to become research subjects formed a reading group. Sumara had arrived at the position he continues to espouse; that deep engagement with texts provides insight and that this is even more important at this point in our history when there is so much information that can and is gleaned so superficially. He challenges the current understanding of literature study, which entails a lot of superficial reading and the practice of “identifying literary devices”, and the writing of “critical essays” (2002, p. 157).

It is a similar belief that motivated Wilson to argue passionately against the ready acceptance of the all-encompassing term “text” and the “vast amounts of territory” thrust at schools to be incorporated as curriculum. He has argued for limitation in order that deep learning might occur. “Deep understanding takes time”. It is his belief that as teachers we have moved to valuing process and denying the value of knowledge (Wilson,

2002). While ‘knowledge’ is a highly contested term in postmodern discourse each of these writers identifies the problem as the uncritical acceptance of processes advocated for the English classroom. Sumara is also critical of practices which value what is already known over inventing “new ways of knowing”(p160). Gordon Pradl expressed a similar criticism believing that our whole orientation of set text study has been towards supplying answers rather than engaging in a process of enquiry (Pradl, 1994 & 1996).

Both Sumara and Wilson believe that knowledge can only be gained from sustained engagement, which once gained, can be transferred to other situations.

I have learned that it cannot be discovered. Instead insight is fashioned from what Francois Lyotard (1984) called “let petits recits” ...the small stories. Deep insight emerges from the hard work of interpreting one’s relations with people, the objects people have made (including narratives that describe and explain experience) and to the more than human world.

(Sumara, 2002, p.4-5)

It is the connection between imagination and insight that provides the basis for his argument for supporting schools in the important work of fostering this imagination, of providing what he calls “commonplaces”. This connection is also a key concept in the questions about the existence of possibilities for students through their set text study. “To imagine then, is to create interpretive bridges between what is held in memory, what currently exists and what is predicted about the future” (p.5). In this book, Sumara looked closely at the construction and the worth of those “interpretative bridges” by examining the way literary practices “can transform imaginative occasions into productive insights” (p. 13).

4.2 Learning tasks in the classroom

Readers who know the power of the literary experience will return to it throughout their lives. These are the kinds of readers we should be working to develop in our classroom.

(Wilhelm, 1997, p.145).

One of the most valuable insights for my study from Van der Hoevan's research was provided by her examination of the impact of some of the common practices employed in English classrooms. This further elucidates the challenges inherent in the argument for democratic practice as espoused by Pradl (1996). Her interpretation of classroom practice in each of the case studies gives the reader a very clear insight into the subtleties operating in the design of assessment and class tasks. As an example, she cited the way the physical construction of a worksheet favoured single word responses and therefore eliminated the more thoughtful responses permitted in the preceding group work. She acknowledged the tension that exists for a teacher in trying to affirm a more sophisticated and perhaps effective vocabulary but in doing so, eliminates the responses of some students (p323).

Van der Hoevan's concern was also identified by Mackey and Johnston (1994) as a problem. Both researchers expressed concern that the structure of classroom processes privilege responses which favour knowledge of detail over a greater achievement of imaginative engagement which would be reflected in more dynamic individual responses. Other writers fear that the processes of such attention to detail reinforce patterns of decoding which seem to be characteristic of less able readers (Wilhelm, 1997) rather than developing a fuller textual response of highly engaged readers. Peterson and Bainbridge (2002) took this argument a step further by identifying the ways "cultural capital" is valued, and particular socio-cultural positions endorsed, in writing and reading tasks. They built on the work of Muspratt, Luke and Freebody (1997) in identifying not just the privileged perspectives that are embedded within some classroom processes, but in seeing them as serving "the organizational needs of the institutions of schooling and the stratified interests within social organizations" (pp.191-192).

In looking at the assumptions underlying recommendations towards remedying some of the gaps in existing text choice, I alluded to the inherent ideological positions teachers

wanted to challenge (see 4.3). A number of writers have deconstructed texts in terms of the gendered messages considered inherent in the text (Kelly-Byrne, 1991; Davies, 1993; Cherland, 1994; Connor, 1999). Kelly-Byrne undertook a comparative study at a Melbourne secondary school of the text-teaching practices of a male and female teacher. Her findings showed that in terms of evaluating gendered messages, it was not just content that was important, but an evaluation of how the works and their construction are dealt with in the classroom also mattered (Kelly-Byrne, 1991). Her research is important for a number of reasons; for the perspectives on gendered behaviour and teaching practices it gives, for the exposition of the impact of diverse teacher readings dependent on the teacher's own enculturation, for the elucidation it provides by highlighting the unconscious messages teachers may bring to a classroom set text study. Again it is unlikely, that students will articulate these positions, but that does not mean such ideological positioning is not part of their experience.

In his evaluation of why things were going so badly in his school's English department (see 4.1), Massey (2002) found that many of the tasks required meaningless comprehension exercises e.g. "What colour beanie did Carl wear to the disco", true/false task sheets, research tasks on obscure textual features". While Massey recognised the systemic problems that allow such practices to continue, he also claimed that such a position is not sustainable, particularly with a generation of students whose sophisticated use of computer games requiring higher order skills "make(s) a mockery of our English teaching". These perspectives correlate directly with two of the research questions on students' perceptions of the learning activities of their set text study and their non-school reading practices. While teachers have obviously identified the nature of tasks as a problem, I wanted to know what students make of these requirements particularly in light of the print and non-print reading they engage in by choice.

4.3 What constitutes an appropriate set text?

While this research is consciously trying to provide a counter balance to the adult focussed research in existence, an understanding of marketing strategies, cultural attitudes, teaching practices and school processes which contribute to the selection of

particular texts, can provide useful dimensions in understanding some of the factors contributing to the experience of students.

Scutter evaluated the kinds of young adult and teenage fiction which were promoted in the latter 20 years of the 20th century (see p. 2.4). She urged the reader to be mindful of the promotional strategies employed which have led to such ready acceptance of some of these books into the school curriculum. In a contextual reading of the student responses in this study, it is important to understand some of the competing interests in what is prescribed. The literature points to the myriad of factors which operate in the selection of set texts and gives important clues on beliefs about teaching literature. Chapter 2 provides an historical overview on the evolution of the set text. Recognising how value driven the perception of appropriateness is, also gives an historical perspective on set text selection.

The work of Beavis (1997) pointed to the nationalistic values that influenced text selection earlier last century whereas Ryan suggested that what was deemed appropriate a decade ago has become obviously inappropriate (Ryan, 1999). Personal connection reflecting the move towards individualism post 1960s and the desire for transformation, were notions present in the selection of texts by individual teachers (Sarland, 1991; Sumara, 2002), though sometimes the reasons had nothing to do with either pedagogy or perceived literary value, the text might have been the only class set still left in the cupboard (Sarland, 1991). At different times the prevalence of dominant traits of the dominant culture in set texts has been criticised, e.g. traditional nuclear families, Anglo-Saxon names: Solutions seems to have been seen in providing a different set of textual features rather than in skilling students to recognise the texts as cultural constructs.

A perennial difficulty at some levels is the inclusion of Australian texts, and in particular, the work of indigenous writers. The resulting choices incorporate Aboriginal characters, single parent families, characters with significant mental disorders, peer groups more aligned with the population make-up of the author's home country.

(Maker, 2001 p.98)

Ideas of giving students access to cultural collateral has been identified as a recurring theme (Ryan, 2000; Sarland, 1991), as is the difficulty in trying to balance competing ideals such as choosing between texts that immediately appeal to students (Saxby, 1997)

and affirm their cultures, and selecting texts which extend students' language experience (Ryan, 2000).

As part of her research on the revised VCE Literature course, Beavis explored patterns of text choice within that course.

For most, it remained important still to include a number of texts with canonical status...for some it was to do with accessibility, familiarity, exam results and with the teachers' sense that there was much in these texts to be explored.

(Beavis, 2000 p.53)

Ryan in her study of reading Shakespeare in secondary schools elucidated some of the dimensions of canonical study. Both teachers and students in their responses indicated that they saw some value in studying a text which is valued highly in society. At the same time, Ryan reported her concern at how apparently alien this text is for some students, though she did feel that some students were caught up in a resistance to all texts.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, relevance was advocated as a key criteria in the selection of set texts. Sarland, (1991) used the notion of readers "finding themselves". He also argued that literature is important in allowing students to learn a dimension that is not possible from the factual content of other subjects. In contrast to others who have argued relevance to students' experience, Sarland cited the example of a case study where students were vitally interested in subjects such as death and sex which were not yet part of their experience. In his book, *Young People Reading: Culture and Response* (1991), Sarland focussed on the difficulty of dealing with controversial popular fiction in the classroom but identified literature as a "way in" to otherwise censored areas. "Sexuality is dealt with in a scientific, medical, health context, or within a very closely monitored moral framework. Only fiction can offer the felt experience of sexual acts" (1991, p. 73), though one would have to argue that electronic media could offer a similar perspective.

Others have presented counter arguments to the push for relevance, both, because what is immediately relevant can be seen as "thin and unsatisfactory" with hindsight and because of the danger of young people rejecting what their elders see as 'relevant' on principle" (Byatt, 1998, p. 43). Taylor (in Niewenhuizen, 1994), a secondary school teacher at the

time of publication, argued against the trend of choosing books for "relevance or accessibility". She argued that these things are short-lived and challenged readers to consider what draws them to return to particular books.

If we believe that literature should take us from where we are to where we could be then we open up a whole range of possibilities. Books should extend our range of experiences and help us to grapple with what it is to be human as we face moral dilemmas, conflicts and choices... We return to books with a moral heart, books that give an affirmation to human experience, books that tell us more about ourselves and the world we live in.

(Taylor in Niewenhuizen, 1994, p.118)

Gendered ideological positions in texts were challenged during the 1980s and evaluation of text selection according to gendered principles featured in a number of studies dealing with the study of set texts (Cherland, 1994; Kelly-Byrne, 1991; Ryan, 1999). Anecdotal evidence would suggest that while schools in the 1980s began aiming for a more equitable balance of male and female protagonists, teachers have suggested that female students are more accepting of male protagonists/covers than are male students accepting of female characters and covers featuring girls. Less attention seems to have been paid to the mix of female and male authors to which students were being introduced. Van der Hoevan noted that one of her subjects, Ailsa, in selecting a fantasy book with a female protagonist, both catered for the male fantasy readers in her class, and responded positively to the feminist perception that both sexes need to read about strong female characters (Van der Hoevan, 2002).

While text selection is not a focus of this research, it is an important contextual feature of the students' reading experiences. It is also interesting in the light of the theoretical perspectives presented at the beginning of Chapter 3. It would seem that teachers' focus is very much aligned with obvious textual detail rather than more subtle ideological positions. This might help explain the focus on superficial examination of the text in associated set text activities and the reported preoccupation with doing things to the text rather than exploring the reading experience.

4.4 Teaching the set text: The role of teacher

To be an effective reading teacher, one must know one's students and one must know an enormous range of texts and be willing to approach the teaching of them in various ways.

(Wilhelm, 1997)

The literary theory examined in this review clearly demonstrates the need for a contextual examination of school practices such as set text study. While Wilhelm has argued strongly for teacher knowledge of the students and texts, Pradl (1996) has argued for teachers adopting a co-reader stance. Sumara (1996) has presented another angle on the role of teacher by arguing for their honest involvement within the set text study process.

Sumara writes from his own experience as a reader. He is also interested in the way the teacher's relationships with the text and with her/his students' influences and creates possibilities for what happens in the classroom (1996, 2002). In *Private Readings and Public Spaces* he argued against the felt need to hide behind a counterfeit identity that teachers in his study expressed. As a researcher, he felt it important to put himself on the line as fellow reader. "The classroom is the site of complex interwoven relationships between teacher and student, students and each other, teachers and texts, students and texts...these relationships overlap and intertwine" (Sumara, 1996, p.6). There is a long journey between the author's intention, private reading and perhaps shared class reading, four to six weeks of lessons about the text, and an individual student's interpretation. "The teacher must not only guide learners through effective learning programs; the teacher must invest herself or himself in the complex set of relations that comprise the school curriculum." (Sumara, 1996, p.223) Sumara made this declaration at the end of a report on action research which he undertook during the teaching of two different set texts by two different teachers. In both cases, the novels were chosen by the teachers.

One teacher, Anna, read the novel, *Forbidden City*, to the class interspersing it with her own understandings particularly as a result of her time in China. The other teacher, Ingrid, read *The Chrysalids* to her students. While she was distressed by their apparent lack of empathy, she felt unable to engage with the students in any genuine discussion because of her own homosexuality. One of Ingrid's students declared, "I think that Mrs Matisz is

really good at teaching English. She knows more about the subject than any other teacher that I have ever had. ...She really seems to care about the subject. But I don't think she cares about me" (p.223). In contrast to Ingrid's students, Anna's students commented on how helpful they had found the interspersing of her own responses in the shared reading process. Sumara observed that by sharing her evolving responses to the text Anna "was successful in broadening the range of perception and understanding...in making the commonplace for interpretation, as announced by the inclusion of the literary fiction, a larger than usual experience (p.218).

Sumara goes on to wonder if in fact the counterfeit identity has gained dominance and whether this might account for the many teachers who read only at school, that out of school reading has been ruined by counterfeit readings (p.224). If there is any truth to his fear it is a concern, for one of the key objectives of text study is to develop in students a desire for out of school reading. Sumara's concern is fuelled by his observance that teachers are sharing books in very superficial ways. He argues for teachers bringing the passion and close personal connection they enjoy in their out of school reading into the classroom. The focus of my research is student based but in finding out whether or not students see set text study as providing worthwhile learning opportunities, enjoyment, or a pathway to more reading, the teacher's approach might be construed as making a difference to their experience of set text reading. Sumara's findings certainly point very clearly to the need for us as teachers "to stop hiding behind talk about texts and start living through them with our students (p. 232).

Madeleine Grumet, a curriculum specialist, shares Sumara's belief in the pivotal role teachers have in the interpretation of texts. Grumet has written of the disassociation of teachers and challenges us to consider the way teachers have taken second place to the texts being studied.

Because schooling is a complex, ceremonial and ritual form, it is important to study the status of texts in the exchange systems, totem systems of the classroom. For we have displaced school bodies with school texts. I do not ask my students, "Do you understand me?" Instead I ask them to understand my reading of the text. We pass texts between us. We touch the texts instead of each other and make our marks on it rather than on each other.

(Grumet, 1988, p. 144).

Using different language, but based on similar concerns, both Britzman and Pradl challenge the construct of teacher as expert. Britzman sees this construct as a normalizing fiction that serves to protect the status quo (1991). Pradl who believes so passionately in classrooms as sites of democracy, has argued that teachers must present a more vulnerable persona than expert status allows. It is his contention that students will benefit greatly by being privy to a teacher's first tentative attempts at meaning-making, that the first reading at least sometimes ought to occur with the students. His argument against the display of "correct answers" is based on his belief that it limits literary exploration to the conveying of information and works against democratic processes of shared perspectives.

Building on the opportunities of uncertainty and indeterminacy that have been identified by post structuralism and reader response criticism, we now see that a lack of closure encourages democratic accessibility. Previously by acting as though there were final readings for texts, we denied students access to contested readings. When certainty dominates, we lose the joy of being a social reader and a member of a response-ible community.

(Pradl, 1996, p. 107)

A useful linguistic term from Pradl's work which helps elucidate this concept is his distinction between first and second acts of reading. Pradl argued that teachers tend to present only second acts of reading in the classroom domain but by embracing the more vulnerable position of shared first readings, a teacher allows greater expression in the classroom, as well as allowing a more accurate and helpful modelling process to occur. Circumstances such as reading a text as part of text selection process, or at least as a prelude to planning a sequence of lessons mitigate against this recommendation, but it does not preclude the practice of shared, spontaneous readings of smaller texts (Pradl, 1994, p. 241-243).

How much more beneficial might it be for these students if they were to engage with the teacher in that first reading stage, so that students became better equipped at the process of reading. Interpretation thus becomes richer or poorer, not true or false.

(Pradl, 1994, p. 240-241)

The issues presented above raise one of the most contentious issues about the teacher's role. What is a fair thing to ask of teachers when it comes to their teaching relationships? As part of the broader understanding of the students' experience of set text study which I

am seeking, I want to know what difference does the role adopted by teachers make to these students.

In the two relatively recent surveys of young Australians' reading practices, a common finding emerges which should be of interest and possibly concern, to teachers. Only 9% of teenage respondents nominated their teacher "as a main source of advice on good books to read" (Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001, p.28). In the survey conducted by Manuel and Robinson (2002) a different perspective was presented. In reporting on the source of their 'favourite book', "31% of the girls said that their favourite book had been recommended by a teacher or emerged from compulsory school reading"(p.73). Of the boys only 11% identified teachers or compulsory reading as the source of their favourite book and "twice as many boys as girls reported their 'worst' book came from compulsory class reading" (p.77). This gendered breakdown of information is significant at a time when questions are being asked about the feminisation of the curriculum and concern being expressed about the relative performance of boys in secondary schools. It suggests cause for analysis in a school such as this research site (see 2.2) but it also suggests that if there is a problem related to gendered enculturation of the curriculum, the male presence is required at the stage of curriculum design.

4.5 Textual clues to ideological positioning

4.5.1 Identification with characters

In his essay, *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin argued that a character's activity in a novel is always ideologically demarcated(Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin identified important characteristics of authorial discourse, claiming that while it is an artistic representation, it is the speaking person and his discourse that is the fundamental condition, that which makes a novel a novel. He goes on to argue that

this person is always to one degree or another an ideologue, and his words are always ideologemes. A particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, and one that strives for a social significance.

(Bakhtin, 1981)

While a great deal of post-Bakhtin theory has emphasised factors other than the actions and discourse of a particular character in contributing to an individual's reading, his analysis is a valuable reminder of the ideological position of an artistic representation. His challenge goes further than just identifying the ideology of a character but argues for recognising "authoritative discourse", of examining the extent to which a word is aligned with authority (Holquist, 1990). This is a fundamental challenge in examining students' responses to a chosen set of texts for school study.

Pertinent to the concern with student experience of this study are studies which have examined the concept of developmental stages in student response to text (Thomson, 1987; Appleyard, 1990). My own study offered the opportunity to consider developmental stages in student responses through its longitudinal nature. As with many of the writers in this field, Appleyard's enquiries into the process of becoming a reader stemmed from his own dissatisfaction with what was happening in his own college classes. His research resulted in the identification of five developmental stages, the third of which he called "the reader as thinker". "The adolescent reader looks to stories to discover insights into the meaning of life, values and beliefs worthy of commitment, ideal images and authentic role models for imitation" (Appleyard, 1990, p. 14).

Recognizing the importance of developmental stages in student responses is important, particularly in a longitudinal study such as in this research, where, when the younger half of the students were asked to be part of the research, they were at the end of Year 8. By the time the data gathering was complete, they were half way through Year 10. Thomson (1987) and Appleyard (1990) while arguing that students can develop their reading practices, are cautious about being too prescriptive about developmental stages.

The argument for the teaching of the skills of critical literacy is fundamental to the concerns based around ideological positioning presented in the two final research questions. Helping students to develop the skills to see how they are being invited in to a text or positioned in relation to characters or situations is liberating in a personal sense. It potentially diminishes textual power and increases the power of the reader. However, the belief that students will always learn what a teacher intends to teach is an assumption. Appleyard warned of the potential effect on those students who have been schooled in

critical literacy so that they “dissect skeptically whatever he or she reads...(and) may yield to the jaundiced adult’s conviction that nothing holds any significance any more” (p17). Faulkner’s note of caution presents a different slant. In arguing for the use of critically literate practices in the classroom, she warns against accepting the hollow use of the language of critical literacy and to be aware of students “playing the game” – “‘Successful’ learning ought not be reduced to expertise in managing the technical discourse” (2002, p.273).

Sumara offered another note of caution that is pertinent to the issues raised by the fourth research question which seeks understanding on the relationship of reader to literary characters. Sumara warns against taking too simplistic a view when examining the connection student readers make with characters.

These close reading practices have the potential to teach readers how to become attentive to details that shape perception. Although readers probably experience this as an attachment to literary characters, I suggest that what is experienced is actually for what the relationships sponsors--an interpretative site where personal insight is generated.

(Sumara, 2002, p. 122)

The construction of identity through reading fiction is the primary focus of Cherland’s (1994) work. While her specific interest is in gender identity, she had much to say that is of specific relevance to this study. She like me, sought to establish whether there is a link between what the students are reading and the people they will choose to become. While she acknowledged the range of historical, social and cultural influences, she concluded that students do indeed through their reading, work out in quite gender specific ways, how to behave in the present, and how to mediate future possibilities. Her research was far reaching, from parent interviews to an analysis of visual representations found on note-cards, postcards and advertisements that her subjects may have encountered. Her research sample was a group of seven 6th grade girls from a middle class Canadian school (p. 29). While in my research, the Australian group of students is larger in size, not gender specific, less affluent (p. 63-64), and a different age range, her contention that literature gains its power through social construction (p. 96-102 & 198) is fundamental to my study of how students perceive the cumulative experience of textual readings and classroom practices.

4.5.2 Identification with situations

Literature not only makes possible the experience of diverse patterns of the past and present, it also offers the opportunity to envisage new and more desirable patterns.

(Rosenblatt, 1968, p.195)

Although Rosenblatt clearly argued for the place of reading in influencing society and recognised the intense emotional experience some reading brings, she clarified her position on direct cause and effect on an individual by declaring: “Fortunately or unfortunately, the human being is not plastic enough to be easily moved to any new action simply by reading representations of it” (Rosenblatt, 1968, p. 196). To exemplify this, she noted that it was many years after the literary representations of the emancipated woman were published, that this image was lived out by an appreciable number of women. At that time, Rosenblatt felt that literary representation could not compete with all the other factors at work in the society. At the same time, Rosenblatt recognised the power that literature does have in transmitting culture, propagating stereotypes, conveying social attitudes and maintaining social constructs. In doing so, she acknowledged it as one of the competing pressures on the individual and his acquired sense of the world about him and ponders one of the chief concerns of this thesis; the repeated impact of such images (Rosenblatt, 1976).

References to the examination of the experience of repeated or unexamined literary representations has tended to occur in relation to gender (Cherland, 1994; Kelly-Byrne, 1991; Thau, 1998) and racial issues (Sumara, 1996; Van der Hoeven, 2002), but not exclusively so. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Australians are well into middle age before they realise that Australia lost the battle of Gallipoli, so insistent has been the portrayal of the Australian hero and the concept of Australia becoming a nation through its First World War involvement. Gordon Pradl recounted a similar awakening when he wrote of his own journey in coming to terms with the way the American Revolution had been represented. The personal significance for him was through his mother’s Canadian ancestry and the realization therefore that his forebears were United Empire Loyalists. Having been presented with the history of the victors in school and the “non-fiction”

accounts he had read, he then encountered a novel, *Oliver Wiswell* by Kenneth Roberts presenting a clear anti-war and pro-Loyalist stance.

Seeing the Loyalist perspective expressed repeatedly in reaction to fictionally recreated historical episodes had a cumulative effect on me. I experienced a shift in reality.

It was not just an intellectual lesson; my feelings had been deeply engaged through this reading experience with a text no-one would claim as great literature.

(Pradl, 1994, p.62)

As explained in the methodology, the scope of this thesis required me to restrict my evaluation to students' responses of one situation only, and because the prevention of suicide had become such a compelling issue in our school, I chose the representation of suicide.

John McKenzie, a New Zealand researcher, sought to ascertain the sorts of representations of suicide that students were encountering in Young Adult Fiction (McKenzie, 2002, pp.192-219). While his findings were necessarily non-conclusive in terms of a direct correlation between acts of suicide and a student's reading, his research and findings raise important questions for teachers of set texts.

Three key concerns identified by McKenzie were: the ethical responsibility of those in schools who choose or disseminate literature containing representations of suicide, the concept of intellectual freedom and the inherent freedom to write at will (about youth suicide) and the issues that can inform the practitioners' use of this literature.

In examining the representations of suicide in several Young Adult Fiction novels, McKenzie drew attention to the problematic nature of these representations. Some of these included:

- the way social realism is dealt with as a genre
- that young people are not positioned to question the authenticity of the adolescent viewpoint.
- the non or ineffectual representation of helping agencies

- the non-representation of the physiological aspects of an unsuccessful suicide attempt, or the detailed representation of more effective means of successful suicide attempts
- the silencing of voices which might occur either by non-inclusion or the particular location of the suicide in the narrative

Morgan and Misson in their discussion of the ideology of the aesthetic through the promise of intense experience, cite examples of acts of violence, narratives of suspense or horror, “that allow us to rehearse extreme emotions with safety, but savouring the dangerous intensity all the same” (2004). They base this premise on their belief that as readers, “we retain considerable autonomy in our relations with the text” (2004). By contextualising this study in terms of students’ other textual experiences, the particular school experience of classroom settings, the number of students and requirements of text-based activities, I am raising questions about our capacity to be confident that all students can retain enough autonomy, particularly with repeated textual representations.

My research is concerned with how students experience the representations presented to them through their set text study. I am wondering whether we can be confident of the notion of ‘safety’ or assume that students can maintain autonomy in their textual relations in some instances, when in other school situations, textual experiences are provided with a view to influencing students towards a specific view of adult identity. As did McKenzie’s, my study operates from a critical literacy perspective accepting that a text is not innocuous, ‘that its functions are never neutral or innocent’ (Kamler and Comber, 1996, p.1). Because of this, the questions on representation need to go far beyond an examination of the set of texts, beyond the requirements of the tasks associated with the set text study and the relationships of the bodies involved in these textual transactions, to the students’ perceptions of those features as presented in the context of set text study and experienced in relation to their own lives. It is an examination of this meaning-making that has formed the basis of this study.

McKenzie argued for caution because of the difficulty in substantiating the impact of a book on a reader, “we do not know in any substantive way what the impact of a story may be for readers, especially for those at risk of suicidal behaviour”, this is “a

compelling reason for the non-representation of suicide in adolescent literature, especially in unmediated settings” (McKenzie, 2002, p. 213).

One of the significant motivators in schools managing a post suicide crisis is to avoid the “cluster” effect. While this is a well-known phenomenon, less is known about why it happens, although imitation has been perceived as the direct cause (Phillips & Carstenson, 1986, p. 685). *The New England Journal of Medicine* reported the findings of a research study into this clustering effect following television coverage of suicides (Phillips & Carstenson, 1986). A media representation is different from a literary representation. The context in which students watch television footage is different from the context of set text study. Nonetheless, two findings emerged which are important.

The findings of this study strongly suggest that televised news stories about suicide trigger a significant rise in teenage suicides: that the more publicity the news story receives, the greater is the increase in teenage suicides: and that news stories providing general information about suicide are just as dangerous as specific stories.

(Phillips & Carstenson, 1986, p.689)

The careful phrasing of discussion about suicide in curriculum materials suggests that constructors of these are conscious of how contentious this form of literary representation has become. In a “Wizard” guide (commonly used curriculum support material), to a popular teenage fiction novel, *The Gathering*, under the subtitle “themes: suicide”, the reader is told

The difficult issue of suicide is handled with a blend of gritty realism and pathos... The author does *not* glorify suicide or even present it as a viable option. Rather suicide is presented in each case as a consequence of an individual’s troubled state of mind, as a brutal and destructive way of avoiding the larger personal issues that beset them.

(Fusillo, 1998, p. 37)

Two factors emerge from this, one is the implication that a student reader’s reading will be the same as for the author of this curriculum material, the other is the finding of Phillips and Carstenson mentioned above, that the type of portrayal is not the determining factor on whether or not a representation could be an influence towards the act of suicide.

The actual portrayals of suicides were described by the writer of the Wizard guide in these ways. “Samuel’s suicide is presented as a cold and sad act of self-doubt and fear” and “Anna Galway’s three failed attempts at suicide are mentioned only once, and then only to put into context the misery of her life ... Her attempts at her own life seem more a cry for help than a determined act of self-destruction” (p. 37). These are some of the precise concerns raised in McKenzie’s work. By “mentioning only once” three failed suicide attempts, the reader is not likely to have any information on the actual physiological trauma and potential long-term damage which could result from a failed suicide attempt. One simply cannot know what meaning-making is occurring for the fearful and self-doubting students who read of these literary suicides which have been described in this curriculum guide “as a way of avoiding the larger personal issues that beset them” (p. 37).

Issues of emotional impact of literary representations have been raised in the literature and the media. Caution against exposure to cumulative representations of suicide has been expressed by Michael Carr-Gregg (2000), perhaps Victoria’s best-known Victorian adolescent health specialist. At a series of seminars to teachers and health workers presented in recent years, Carr-Gregg has drawn attention to lists of commonly used set-texts featuring suicides. The implication is that such sequences of suicide representations are a concern.

The question of whether or not cumulative literary representations of events such as suicide could influence a student towards such an act was a starting point for part of this research. Quality of life questions, such as level of distress caused by these representations evolved as the research progressed.

While not specifically related to the issue of suicide, Deborah Appleman’s (2002) concern with student well being, echoed with what evolved as an issue during the data-gathering period. I started to wonder if the act of reading particular texts was causing distress to some students. Appleman too was concerned by the level of disturbance in her students’ non-school lives and felt this had a strong bearing then on what she was prepared to do in school.

I have to incorporate the spaces that kids need. For example, after a weekend when they've had two days of stuff. Contemporary theory holds that there is no such thing as an innocent, value free reading. Instead each of us has a viewpoint invested with presuppositions about "reality" and about ourselves, whether we are conscious if it or not.

(Appleman, 2002)

Scholes presented the concept of intertextuality in a way that exposes the tension of this research but which presents a powerful argument for examining the intertextual experience of students. While accepting an all-encompassing view of intertextuality, he highlighted the place of particular texts with a series of visual examples. In one instance he used the photo "Tomoko in the Bath" (p.23) to illustrate that while this text proved so effective politically in addressing the issue of industrial pollution, it also resonated with him on a deeply personal level. For him, the image was reminiscent of the Christian icon of "Madonna and child", an image familiar to him from his own childhood experience of Catholicism, a religious tradition he had long ago rejected. Having a text resonate so powerfully for him despite his rejection of Catholicism, and despite the cultural difference in the texts led him to ponder the power of texts in affecting subconscious associations (1989, p.22-27).

Examining this concern within the framework of literary theory exposes a critical tension in undertaking this research. On the one hand, theoretical developments have led us to think about the act of reading as an intertextual experience, so to consider the potential impact of literary representations could be dismissed by some as naïve, or too conservative a view to be taken seriously. On the other hand, the need to question school processes considering the present reality of adolescent and teenage health is being presented to schools as an urgent need. The perspectives presented in this review of the literature show how widely held is the belief that literature has the capacity to effect some change in an individual. Within the perspectives presented, is the clear view that ideology presents through texts and set text study in ways far more complex and more subtle than through the reading of specific textual features. The evolving positions on literary theory presented here remind us that we do not know all there is to know about reading. What we do know from our work in schools is that the extent of serious welfare issues compels us to respond to the problem critically.

4.6 Overview

This literature review has sought to provide selections of the literary theory and cultural perspectives which have helped form the construct of set text in the subject English. It has provided some contemporary views on the way set texts are being selected and taught by teachers, and read and studied, by students in the secondary level of schooling. It examines the act of reading and beliefs about reading. Finally, it reports on what others have written about the notion of transformation through reading literature. Specifically, it reports on the work that has been done in relation to the possibility of student readers adapting literary representations into their emerging sense of what is possible for their own lives.

5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction

In the opening chapter of this thesis, I described the ideological uneasiness that caused my shift from teacher to teacher-researcher. In calling into question the effectiveness of my “set text” teaching practices, I set about to increase my understanding of the students’ experience of set text study. To frame this understanding, I devised five guiding research questions (see 1.2). The literature review in the previous two chapters outlines developments within literary theory and presents perspectives from other teacher researchers seeking to answer similar questions by undertaking classroom based research.

In this chapter, I outline my theoretical research position and show how it evolved from my ontological and epistemological views. I explain my choice of methodology and set out the methods which emanated from this. While this chapter is practically orientated in its descriptions of methodology and methodological processes, I have set this description against the theoretical beliefs which influenced the decisions I made in establishing and conducting the research. This chapter builds on the theoretical positioning described in Chapter 3 which shows how evolving theoretical positions have influenced beliefs about reading and using literature in schools.

5.2 Establishing a theoretical framework

In identifying a theoretical framework through which to conduct this research, it is necessary to accept that my understanding of the way knowledge is constructed and therefore my approach to gaining knowledge crosses some of the commonly accepted theoretical boundaries. In light of that, Guba and Lincoln’s (2004) reminder that the accepted paradigms, while they may have been argued for forcefully and hence have become part of established ways of thinking about research are, “in all cases human constructions; that is they are all inventions of the human mind and hence subject to error” (p. 22).

My starting point in this research in identifying the set text as a site of interpretation hints at a positivist approach in that it is accepting the view that the text holds intrinsic power. That position is not sustained in that I am trying to understand the lived experience of this form of text study. I am seeking to understand the nature of the meaning-making that is occurring as a result of students meeting the text within the study of English in the secondary school environment.

It is the concept of reality which allows for the grasping of multiple realities which are “socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, ... and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the construction” (Guba & Lincoln, 2004 p.26) which provides the ontological basis for this research. Epistemologically, I am operating from an understanding that what can be known will be influenced by relationships and experience, that knowledge is transactional and subjective. As a result of these positions, my study can be described as constructivist¹.

I am interested in the students’ responses to the text and their experience of this type of study. As a teacher and researcher in the early 2000s, I am operating in an educational field whose contemporary construction has evolved alongside the post-structural movement. In the literature review, I refer to the impact of Foucauldian thought on school practices (see 3.2). As a teacher, reader and now researcher, I have been subject to that influence. In reading for and thinking about the specifics of this research as a text created from other discourses, I have come to recognize the centrality of language to the act of research (Crotty, 1998 p.87-88). Inevitably, this influences the way I see texts, the research process, participants and myself in this research process.

Constructivism is concerned with the way meaning emanates from interactions and practices which subscribe particular meanings to the objects, people and relationships being studied. Human beings construct the meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism as a theoretical research paradigm contrasts with positivism which supports the finding of a truth based on objective reality. The inherent belief within positivist thinking of scientific objectivity is evident still in research circles which hold to the belief that all research should be totally replicable

¹ Constructivism is also known by the term interpretivism (Crotty, 1988) and in the past has also been known as naturalistic enquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1995).

(Moon, 1990 p.8). This belief still exists in some academic circles alongside a push towards verifying qualitative data by measurements which stem from a positivist framework. Transferability or the capacity to generalize, once seen as characteristic of valuable research and a measure of credibility, is now being challenged in favour of interest in the particular (Janesick, 2003; Stake, 2003). Research such as this study, which prioritises both the unique experience of individuals and each act of reading, clearly embraces this challenge. A cautionary note is offered by Weber (2004) to what he perceives as stereotypical views of each of these paradigms. This is reassuring to a researcher such as myself whose work doesn't in all ways fit comfortably into previously accepted paradigms.

Within the constructivist paradigm are a number of specific approaches to human enquiry. I adopted a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 1998; Small, 1999) for two reasons. Firstly, it incorporates the idea of calling into question what is taken for granted (Crotty, 1988 p. 78-80). Within the school context, I wanted to examine an assumed way of doing things. Secondly, as a researcher in a school setting, I am seeking to understand the complex world of students living through the experience of set text study. As such, I have adhered to a phenomenological approach which essentially attempts "to describe and elucidate the meanings of human experience" (Rudestam, 2001, p.156). This challenges the dominant paradigm operating in many areas of school learning and research, which accepts the process of learning as the acquisition of facts rather than embodied learning. Embodied learning not only sees the body as the carrier of knowledge and the instrument of learning but seeks processes which support this belief (Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 2000).

Engaged in the work of interpretation through constructivist research, I am not seeking a fixed reality. Rather, I am seeking to understand the reality as constructed by each participant and viewed from his or her perspective. This capacity for multiplicity of perspectives is an inherent characteristic of this form of research. I understand that the process of research includes my own role as interpreter and co-constructer of the new texts being created. Denzin has written of the process of learning and making sense of what one has learned through the act of writing, in first telling oneself of the experience and then telling it to others in "the public phases of textual reconstruction" (2004, pp. 460-461). The adoption of first person narrative style clearly foregrounds the position I

hold as researcher and interpreter. Brodkey argued that the outstanding epistemological advantage of interpretation was the realization that although experience could not be recovered, it could be narrated (In Britzmann, 1991). This is the case and in this thesis, it is the essential task. Recognizing that other texts are being created in the writing and then in each reader's reading of the thesis is fundamental to the nature of my understanding of research (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

5.3 Methodological Approach

Given the constructivist focus of this research, a qualitative methodology seemed to best support the form of enquiry I was undertaking. As my pre-dominant interest was in understanding the students' experience of set text study during their secondary school years, I felt that a qualitative approach would best allow the building up of an understanding of the complexity of the students' experiences, through both reflection on previous set text experiences and their experience during the year of research.

Essentially, my reasons for undertaking a qualitative study were five fold:

- Level of response required
- The characteristics of school based enquiry
- The inductive nature of this form of research
- The capacity for reflexivity
- Personal learning style

5.3.1 Level of response

The depth of information I was seeking from the students required an ongoing personal relationship. It is unlikely that I would gain reflections, memories and beliefs from either a single interview or a single or series of questionnaires. Conducting the interviews over a one-year period provided the double advantage of building rapport which enhanced the level of response and gave the extended sort of response in most cases that I was hoping

for. Extended engagement continues to be considered one of the hallmarks of high quality qualitative work (Lincoln & Guba, 1999; Hatch, 2002, p.8).

5.3.2 School based enquiry

Although I was clear on what I wanted to achieve and with whom, anyone who works in schools understands the unpredictability of school life. I needed a methodology that could encompass the flexibility required in a school context and by the nature of my enquiry. Similarly, although I had a clear idea of the group of students with whom I wanted to work, I did not know these students in person and certainly neither ethically nor practically, was I in a position of control as to students' availability or willingness to contribute. I needed a methodology which could adapt to the changes and limitations dictated by the participants both as school students and as individuals.

5.3.3 Inductive nature of qualitative research

It is argued that qualitative researchers need be able to adapt their research design to the emerging situation (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln, 1995). While it was important for me to have the students respond to my initial research questions, my overarching query of 'What is the experience of set text study like for these students?' required a more inductive approach where I could build my interviews on the data I was being given (Bogdan, 1992). As far back as 1967, Glaser and Strauss wrote of the importance of valuing new knowledge that emerged and using it to generate theory rather than seeing it as a "by-product of the main work" (1967). With my intention being to listen to the students' perspectives, it was important that I allowed the data gathering to go in directions they raised rather than always being confined to pre-set questions based on *my* research questions.

5.3.4 Capacity for reflexivity

Given my official role, as teacher of English in the senior school, and House-leader of most of the participants (see 5.5.1), and the students' roles as students and members of the school community, and the ongoing personal relationship that was going to evolve over the year, I needed a methodology that paid attention to the way the act of my research might contribute to the research. The capacity for reflexivity in the methodology allows for the realities of researching in a school setting to be addressed properly. I wanted a method that was faithful to my own belief in the narrative being constructed as the students and I enacted the research process, and one that acknowledged the limitations of putting language around an experience (see 5.10.3).

5.3.5 Personal learning style

The American ethnographer Wolcott (1990) has argued for learning through a style of research that suits the nature of the researcher. Punch referred to this predisposition towards a style of research as "the subconscious temperament factor" (Punch, 2000), and identified it as one of a range of valid reasons for opting for a particular approach. As well as my general interest in students and what they think, my work as House-leader requires me to know the students personally. Choosing to undertake a qualitative approach to this research provided me with professional satisfaction and personal enjoyment, as well as incorporating some of the work which is required of me in my role of House-leader.

A criticism of qualitative work has been the interweaving of process and findings, that one influences the other. But in this research, it was precisely the fact that I was intrinsically involved in the social order of the research site that allowed a close study of the students' experience. Hatch reported the findings of other researchers and from this perspective, argued the contention that:

The capacities to be reflexive, to keep track of one's influence on a setting, to bracket one's biases, and to monitor one's emotional responses are the same capacities that allow researchers to get close enough to human action to understand what is going on. (Hatch, 2002, p. 10)

Reflexivity as well as being an aspect of a preferred style of learning, allows the sort of thinking and reflection that seems paramount to a more complete reading of the student experience.

5.4 Case study:

Thinking carefully about an individual child is to think about the world we provide for that child and for each other.

(Madeleine Grumet, In Adam, p. xii)

Madeleine Grumet, an American curriculum theorist has encouraged the type of deep research I have undertaken. In using the term 'deep research' I am embracing the longitudinal aspect of the research but more significantly the search for individual understanding and insights. Grumet cites the ideology of Virginia Woolf to "dip your line deep in the stream" (Adam, 1999). In seeking to understand what this experience is really like for a few students rather than an overview of many, I pursued a case study approach, using multiple depth interviews using open, direct questions" (Miller & Crabtree, 2004, p.189) with ten interviewees.

A focus of Stake's (2003) work is the distinction he makes between different forms of case study. While I am interested in the individual experience of those being studied, ("intrinsic case study") in all their "particularity and ordinariness" (p.136), I wanted to learn about the experience of set text study. Stake refers to this process of studying a phenomenon through researching individual cases as "instrumental case study"(p.137), though he clarifies that there is not a clear line of distinction but rather a "zone of combined purpose" (p. 137).

The case facilitates our understanding of something else...The case is still looked at in depth, its contents scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest. The case may be seen as typical of other cases or not.

(Stake, 2003, p. 137)

The phrase “collective case study” has been used to describe the chosen form of case study (Denzin, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2003). It was not the group that I studied, but rather a number of individual cases. Stake’s position is that this choice is made because understanding them will lead to better understanding and better theorizing of a larger collection of cases (Stake, 2003).

I established clear boundaries by deciding to work with a sample group of eight (see 4.4.5) students from one secondary school. It is argued that a “bounded system”, such as this, is one of the important distinctions of the case study tradition (Creswell, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Stake, 2003). I have also incorporated extensive, multiple sources of information and situated the study clearly by describing the geographical, cultural and curriculum context of the research site, also deemed to be distinguishing features of a case study.

5.5 Project design

In establishing research procedures, I was endeavouring to mesh effective processes for gathering data with the practicalities of being a full-time teacher/House-leader at the research site. Inevitably compromises on ideals had to be made, but overall, the procedures worked effectively in gaining the information I needed to build up an understanding of the students’ experience of set text study. Furthermore, the processes elicited information that was useful in other dimensions of my work and some of these processes have presented new perspectives on ways these practices could be incorporated into other aspects of school life.

5.5.1 Research site

The study took place at a regional secondary college in the state of Victoria. The college is a dual campus school. The Year 7-9 campus and the administrative centre of the school is situated 7 kilometres from the Year 10-12 campus where I have been working for the past five years. The school has a population of over 1000 students. At each campus the students belong to one of four “Houses”. In 2001, I became the House-leader of one of

these Houses, and as such, am primarily responsible for the administration, welfare and discipline of this group of students. For the students, it means that in these areas of their life, they have an association with the same group of students for their six years of schooling and with the same group of staff for the three years they spend at each campus.

In 2001, the college adopted a vertical structure for curriculum delivery (see 2.2). This allows students to select units according to personal preference and ability level, although considerable parameters apply. In terms of the study of English, this means that from the time students enter the first year of secondary school until they begin their VCE, they will have completed eight units of English, may have studied up to 16 set texts and may have had 8 different English teachers. Students do a comparable amount of English to that done in other schools, but they are likely to do it with a greater number of teachers and class groupings. For this research, this less conventional structure meant there were a greater number of variables, such as set texts, teachers, classes within the research period than otherwise would have been the case.

5.5.2 Research context

English is the compulsory subject at every level of the secondary school. Most schools and certainly the Curriculum Standards Framework 11 (see 2.3) endorse a literature based approach to the study. West claims that almost everyone who has expressed a view in recent years in Secondary English teaching, endorses the proposition that literature is and should remain, central to the teaching and learning of English in the secondary classroom (1994). In terms of class time and assessment tasks, it is the set texts which dominate. For the purpose of this study, books² were the only form of set text being examined. This decision was based on the need for limiting the scope of the research, as well as attending to the dominant practice within the school.

In this school, the way these texts are chosen varies from faculty recommendation and discussion, to choosing from existing books in the class text sets held in the school library, to accepting a book which has gone off the Year 12 list (therefore, resources and

² Many units incorporated a film text as well as the novel text/s. These were the only non-print texts spoken about by the research students. Sometimes they were an adjunct to a novel or play being studied.

books will be easily locatable), to continuing with a book that ‘works relatively well’. The process is random, rather than systematic. At the end of 2002, Year 10 teachers were asked to simultaneously read a potential set text novel. It was unanimously rejected for the reason of “not enough to work with”. With the exception of Year 12 texts (where a text list from which schools may choose their particular texts is supplied by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority), this was my only experience of collegial reading of a potential text. During the last five years, all discussions pertaining to choice of texts have taken place in after-school English faculty meetings, as one item in a busy agenda.

5.5.3 Duration of study

The expected duration of the data-gathering period was 12 months. I had planned to undertake the research during the academic year of 2002. I was convinced that the only way I would get a deep level of thinking and reflection was to have a longitudinal study which allowed for the prolonged engagement that was most likely to support the establishment of trust.

Establishing procedures to begin took longer than anticipated, hence the actual research began towards the end of the first semester of 2002 and concluded just over a year later, at the beginning of second semester, 2003. This meant that the interview period for some of the students actually occurred over three units of English. The significance of this in terms of data collection was that I was able to question students about their current experience with three different classes and three different sets of set texts.

5.5.4 Structuring the data gathering process

At the time of establishing my research questions, I was beginning to seriously think about on-line chat as a potential learning and teaching tool. As I tried to establish a suitable number of research participants, balancing the potential for prolonged engagement, in-depth interviews with my teaching schedule, I pondered the possibility of conducting at least some of the interviews by on-line chat. At that time, although I contacted several key researchers known for their interest in the use of internet

communication in learning institutions, I was not able to find anyone else using the internet for this purpose. I still felt that it would have clear advantages as a research tool. I decided that I would invite students to use it if they had access to MSN chat on their home computers. Half of the students and their parents agreed to this form of interviewing.

I began interviewing 5 students using MSN chat and 5 in face-to-face interviews. As time elapsed and relationships developed, the formats changed. One of the students, who really preferred face to face interviewing, did two on-line interviews. Another student who volunteered to participate so that she'd get more MSN time, would sometimes just come up and chat at school as she came to know me better. In the second semester of the research, when both researcher and respondents were seemingly comfortable with each other and with the process (and when all students were situated on the senior campus), conversations flowed on from previous interviews, both face-to-face and on-line. These were sometimes recorded as notes in my own journal, but more often, they were fleeting interactions occurring in the busyness of a teaching day and as such went unrecorded.

In beginning the research process, I issued students with a questionnaire (Appendix 2), seeking to position them in terms of the reading practices in their homes and to provide some basis on which to start in-depth interviews. In the first interview, I issued students with the ranking sheet (see Appendix 3), partly to ascertain how readily they could recall texts and also as a basis from which I could ask specific questions about individual set text study. Both the questionnaire and the ranking sheet were informative. The questionnaire proved useful in terms of the background knowledge I received and the interviews were able to proceed comfortably.

At the end of the research period, I provided students with the opportunity to write additional comments on their transcripts and to complete a final questionnaire (Appendix 4). This was useful in some cases. Some students were anxious to add information, others were not keen to do any additional written work, and this was reflected in the brevity, or non-existence, of their questionnaire responses.

During the research period I asked students to bring their written work with them. This happened spasmodically. The same request was made to the students who were working primarily on-line, but only one student did this. Hence, in some cases, my viewing of the

students' work, my journal records and reflections, and a pre and post interview questionnaire supported the interviews. In all cases, depth interviewing (Miller & Crabtree, 2004) was the primary strategy for the data gathering. It was my intention to speak with students twice a term for the four terms in which they participated. This was generally the case although sometimes school events, sickness and other commitments prevailed on the scheduled interview. Most often, we rescheduled the interview, but this was not always the case.

5.5.5 Selection of participants

Having decided that a collective case study approach would be the best approach to gathering the data I was seeking, I decided to select eight participants as realistic in terms of management, small enough to gain entry into "the conceptual world of these students" (Cleary, 1991, p. 23), but large enough to allow a gender balance and ability balance. As the study progressed, I felt the right balance had been attained in terms of selection of participants, so much so that when two of the girls dropped out of the project in the first six months, I invited two other girls into the project, maintaining the total number of 8 research participants.

Initially, I sought students by letting teachers of Year 8 and 9 students know what the project was about and asking them to recommend students who ranged across the ability levels but who were likely to have the commitment to stay with the process. By the latter stipulation, let alone the fact that the key topic of conversation was to be books, I knew that a section of the school population would not be represented. As I was seeking the deep experience of a few students rather than a fully representative sample, I accepted the fact that it was unlikely that I would have students who could not read. One of the readers who verified the student data against one set of transcripts felt that this lack of such a significant perspective was a serious limitation.

I accept the criticism as a limitation of this study, however I feel that the ability to proceed realistically with the research was a key priority (Stake 2003; see 5.2.3).

Year 8/9 teachers made their recommendations of students in the months before the research period. I talked with these students, some in their classes, one at the school sports, one at the 'beginning of year' bar-b-que. Following my approach and invitation, I ended up with six students, five boys and one girl. In one case a "recommended" student asked to be part of the project, but didn't last. In another case, I invited several students from one class, didn't hear anything and then months later, a class member walked up to me in the school grounds and asked me when we were going to start.

Concerned about my initial ratio of one girl to five boys, I then specifically spoke to groups of girls as I moved around the school. Another two joined the project. As a final effort to have a balance of gender/interview type (see Table 1), when two of these girls dropped out of the project, I advertised in the "Daily Bulletin" for girls who "hate reading but love MSN"³ and proceeded to work with the first two female students who volunteered. Overall, I have worked with ten students, five from each of Year 9 and 10, five girls and five boys. Six students participated in the project for at least a full year, four others, for about six months each.

³ MSM (Microsoft Network) is the brand name associated with the most commonly used on-line chat program. People talk of "going on MSN". It is a popular form of entertainment especially amongst adolescents. I am aware of many young people who would spend hours chatting on-line, sometimes to people with whom they have been interacting for most of the day.

Table 1 Year 9-10 interviews according to type and frequency

Student	Semester 1 2002	Semester 2 2002		Semester 1 2003		Semester2 2003
	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Term 1	Term 2	
Patrick	♣	♣	♣ ♣	♣	♣ ♣	
Brayden	♣	♣	♦	♣ ♦	♣	
Skye	♣	♦	♦ ♣			
Chelsea				♦ ♦	♦ ♦	
Georgia				♦ ♦	♦	

Table 2 Year 10-11 interviews according to type and frequency

Student	Sem. 1 2002	Semester 2 2002		Semester 1 2003		Sem. 2 2003
	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Term 1	Term 2	
Martin	♣ ♣	♣	♣ ♣	♣	♣ ♣	
Hamish	♣ ♣	♣	♣ ♣	♣ ♣	♣	
Gary			♦ ♦ ♦ ♦	♦ ♦ ♦	♦ ♦ ♦	♦
Kimberley		♦	♦ ♦ ♦	♦ ♦	♦ ♦	♦
Madison		♦	♦	♦	♣	

♣ denotes 45 minute face to face interview

♦ denotes 45 minute on-line interview

5.6 Relationship of the respondents to the researcher

and other ethical issues

As a teacher at the senior campus (Year 10-12) I did not know any of the Year 9 participants. At the time of asking the Year 10 students to participate in the research (at the end of their Year 9 year), I was also unknown to the Year 10s, but this quickly changed as I was House-leader to most of them (see 5.5.1). I had taught one of the Year 10s for one semester when she became part of the project, (she was no longer in my class) but over the year, she became involved in a range of extra-curricular activities with which I was also involved. I suspect the student who asked me “when are we going to start?” wouldn’t have worked with me as a stranger, but after 6 months as his House-leader had established enough confidence or perhaps curiosity, to proceed with the research.

In terms of affecting the researcher/respondent relationship, the time frame for the conduct of the research proved to be very significant. During this period, a number of these students endured a significant personal trauma for which they sought support; two of the students were referred to me by other teachers, one several times for disciplinary reasons, another for personal reasons. Several of the students became involved in extra-curricular activities in which I was involved. As the year progressed, I came to know the families of some of these students. In each case where the students and I worked together for a year, a fairly close student-teacher relationship evolved. It would be difficult to ascertain what part the regular interviews played in developing this relationship as opposed to the expected development of a Student-House-leader relationship. The impact of this relationship on the data could not be known, but its potential should be noted in the contextual reading of the students’ responses and my analysis.

As is required by the University through which this research was undertaken, I completed the ethical clearances prior to and during the research period. I sought permission from the Principal of the school and the regional education office and was given written permission from both. I wrote to the students who had verbally accepted my invitation, and their parents, explaining the process, outlining their rights, assuring them of confidentiality and giving them the information they needed, should they wish to make a

complaint (see Appendices 5, 6 & 7). Lankshear and Knobel rightly point out that conducting ethical research is much more than gaining consent; that it also has to do with “protecting the privacy and respecting the dignity of every study participant” (2004, p.185)

I have in conversation and in the writing of this thesis maintained the confidentiality I originally offered. In the encounters with the research students, during and since the research period I have treated each of them with respect described by Siedman (1991, p. 74) and Lankshear & Knobel (2004, p.185). I have used pseudonyms throughout and not always disclosed gender/age. Sometimes I have omitted information that was interesting/informative but too personally revealing to be included given the confidentiality assurance.

Although aware of the potential for false identity and manipulation in chat rooms, my interviews were highly controlled with only myself and the student who had agreed to a pre-arranged time, chatting together. Whenever another person attempted to join the chat, I would indicate I was busy and proceed with the scheduled interview. Hewson et al (2003) have warned of new ethical issues arising with the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) used as research tools. In particular, they specify the potential for deception as a concern because of the anonymity that is possible. At no point did I need, or would I have wanted to present any persona other than my own, so this was not an issue in this study.

5.7 The interviewing process

Although many features of the interviews were common to both modes of interview, there were particular features that were quite distinctive. The newness at the time of the interviews, of on-line chat as a method of data collection, meant that I was not able to reference my position against the work of other researchers. For this reason I have described this process in greater detail.

5.7.1 Face to face interviews

Establishing rapport is one of the most basic ingredients in effective qualitative research.

Good qualitative interviews are characterised by respect, interest, attention, good manners and encouragement on the part of the researcher... They often begin with small talk that seems to get the informant talking and to make human connections between researchers and informants.

(Hatch, 2002, P. 107)

Having begun the interview process with the questionnaire, it provided a lead-in to a discussion on books and readings. The interviews were semi-structured in that I had outlined the questions I wanted to ask based on my original research questions, but the interviews often took on a life of their own and I would find myself following the train of thought of the students. This phenomenological approach allowed the research to be less dictated by my preoccupations although I sought to gain material I perceived I needed in other interviews if I had not gained a students' views on a key aspect of the research (Hatch, 2002).

The interviews seemingly followed the conventional practice of questions and answers and seemed to progress logically, resulting most often in the information I was seeking. Miller and Crabtree have written of the assumptions implicit in such a description. The depth interview is a particular cultural form. As such it is imbued with particular forms of behaviour: linguistic, organisational and social, with the presence of the other social roles both interviewer and interviewee inhabit (Miller & Crabtree, 2004). The significance of this creation of a multi-layered text is dealt with in more detail in Data Reporting (see 5.2). As other researchers have found, (Cleary, 1991), I too was relieved to discover how willing the students were to try and have me understand. This was particularly evident with some students' clarification and additions on their transcripts.

In the interviews I used, with the students' permission, a small voice activated tape machine. One cannot know the effect of its presence though no unease was apparent. The students as would be expected, varied in the detail and length of their responses. I sometimes prompted when I was seeking further information (Hatch, 2002), but at other

times just waited (Seidman, 1991, p.56-57) and eventually the students spoke again. I endeavoured to finish the interviews five minutes before the end of a class period, though sometimes the bell would signal the end of the interview and we both needed to move quickly. Miller and Crabtree (2004) caution against this lack of post-interview time. While the value of their advice is obvious, the interviews took place in a school context and the intrusion of the school bell signals the end of many learning encounters.

5.7.2 The interviewing process with on-line chat

The tension between developing an effective rapport and becoming over familiar with one's interviewees is a concern for some researchers, so care is needed in any interview situation to ensure the right balance (Hammersly, 1995; Seidman, 1991; Wolcott, 1990). In this research, there were further complications to this issue. Half of the interviews through the use of live chat were trialling an almost uncharted research process.

Using the internet as a medium for data gathering poses its own dilemmas in terms of effective rapport especially when one acknowledges the playful nature of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) (Hine, 2000). The informality, use of nick names, anonymity, fluid identity, group nature and greater knowledge of young people in the use of chat rooms, are all factors I needed to be conscious of in maintaining an effective relationship. While Hine's work focussed on the actual study of internet usage rather than the internet as a tool for data gathering, she has said much that is pertinent to my study. While she acknowledged the factors I've outlined as features of CMCs, her work suggests to me that CMCs, particularly in the controlled setting I established, enabled rather than frustrated this goal of effective rapport. My view is supported by the students' comments on the use of this medium. Hine reports that the famous anthropologist "Margaret Mead may have been fooled by her informants but her failing is held to be that she did not sufficiently engage with the field" (2000 p. 22). I would argue that using a chat room forum with 14-16 year olds in 2002/2003, is a way of engaging with young people in their territory.

The choice of MSN as the on-line chat provider was fairly straightforward. In the students' colloquial language they refer to using MSN, the brand name that has become

synonymous with their process of on-line informal chat. MSN allows each user to establish his/her own hotmail email address and an address book to which they add the addresses of those with whom they'd like to chat on line. Users have the option to block other users who might try to enter their chat domain. Once a user goes on-line, they can then chat simultaneously with any of their contacts.

Users designate themselves a "nick-name". This name precedes each line of conversation which is downloaded to the screen. In the research context, this proved to be another vital clue to mood and personality. Because of the assurance of confidentiality, I felt obliged not to use these names in the reported data. The nick-names used by the students varied enormously and occasionally were changed during an interview. They seemed to be used as quite deliberate attempts to depict aspects of the students' other lives (Albright, 2002). Amongst the nick-names chosen were: lines from a song, a promotion for an upcoming anti-war protest, indications of relationships, informal versions of their own names and cute depictions of character/personality. I retained the same nick-name (a shortened version of my own name) as I used in non-research based chat prior to the interviewing period. This was primarily for my own ease, for easy recognition by the students and because it seemed a minor contribution towards a degree of formality in a new domain in which I was struggling to find the right balance.

At the beginning of the research period, the students and I entered each other's hotmail addresses onto our own lists, but I asked them for exclusive conversation rights during each interview. Generally the on-line interviews were of 45 minutes duration, the same length as the face-to-face interviews. I suspect that with one or two students, their delayed response time indicated they were simultaneously having another conversation. While I found this personally frustrating, I know that is the modus operandi of on-line chatting. In one case, the student interrupting our conversation, referred to a joke she had just read which she quickly forwarded on to me. The students had been told (in writing and verbally) that I would be saving the transcripts at the end of each interview.

In the beginning of the on-line interview process, I was faced with initial questions of formality. Should I use the linguistic abbreviations with which they (with the exception of one interviewee) operated all of the time? Should I introduce myself by my first name to all students because, by the second six months of the interview process they would be at

the campus where staff are generally referred to by their first names? What nick-name was appropriate? How much chit-chat is establishing rapport and not tipping the balance into over-familiarity? In the end, the practices associated with the technology and the development of each relationships dictated how we proceeded. The longitudinal nature of the study and school circumstances determined significant developments in the teacher-student relationships (see 5.6).

The striking characteristic of CMCs that was significant in this study was the altered pattern of relationships. This was reflected in my initial self-consciousness at my comparative lack of expertise, my poorer keyboard skills and my lack of familiarity with some of the linguistic conventions. Some of the students readily tutored me as we progressed in the study. One of the surprises for me at the end of the interview period, was Gary's revelation that he too had saved all our transcripts. It was indeed an example of turning the traditional hierarchical teacher-student relationships on its head. The students were clearly the most expert in terms of the method and had equal access to do whatever they chose with the transcripts.

Less obvious, but perhaps equally significant was the fact that we were chatting in a new domain based from each of our homes. This was not a school office or a classroom with a history and culture of established behavioural expectations. In a different environment where participants did not know each other, the lack of visual clues could have also been highly significant. In evaluating the pedagogical effect of web-based technologies, Jaffe uses the term, "pedagogical ecology" which recognises the possibilities and potential challenges to school and college based learning which has evolved with its prescribed social roles and normative expectations within its conventional physical setting (Albright, 2002; Jaffe, 2003).

Informality is a characteristic of live chat. I was obliged to use whatever shortcuts I could to keep pace with my interviewees' speedier keyboarding skills. I conformed to their linguistic choice. Quickly the focus became listening to their views rather than worrying about how I projected myself as a researcher. As with the face-to-face interviews, I was probably more conscious in the beginning of individual style in presentation or accent. Content in both cases quickly became my focus.

The sustained interview process (in the case of this study, just over a year) that has been noted earlier as a feature of good quality qualitative research (Hatch, 2002) inherently produces a level of intimacy and ease that would not exist with short-term interviewees. I did not feel this challenged the authenticity of the research but rather enabled students to speak freely about their experience. At the end of one interview, one of the participants, Chelsea said she found it “the same as talking 2 friends...it is so easy...coz u can be urself.” It became evident that two of the students (Skye, primarily a face to face interviewee and Madison, primarily, an MSN interviewee) required a greater level of chit-chat to retain their interest. That seemed a small price to pay for some of the information I was seeking.

Attitudes to this form of communication tend to be polarised. There are those who are thrilled by the reality of being able to “chat in real time” with people from different places in the world who share their interests. Anecdotal examples include families who have settled in different countries wanting to simultaneously have a conversation, specialists seeking specialist opinion, insomniacs wanting to chat with anyone who’s still awake, the curious who want to learn from people living their lives in other places. There are those who are fearful of its consequences, dubious of the artificial relationships that can be constructed and in the case of adolescent use, frightened because of the potential for deception. The dominant attitude expressed by parents (one of whom was a parent of a student in this study) to me in my professional role, is that of resentment. They perceive their student/ teenagers spending a lot of time on “social chat” as opposed to homework, and in many households, because the single phone line is in use, other calls cannot be made or received. These polarised attitudes are exemplified in contemporary literature. *Katie.com* (Tarbox, 2000) is an autobiographical account of Katie’s disastrous relationship which was initiated in a chat room. In contrast in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman (1999) has described situations of liberation and international connection enabled by the use of Internet technology. He provides images from the presence of an Internet cafe in Kuwait City to his mother’s international bridge playing pursuits. In one week his mother was playing bridge with three people in France, in another week she was playing with people from Siberia.

It would seem that both teachers and researchers are beginning to consider the value of Computer Mediated Communication as a learning and research tool, but most of the

literature pertaining to either teaching or research use, focuses on more static forms of this technology than live chat. Pragmatic reasons, such as ease of collecting transcripts and saving time, rather than communicative reasons tend to be reported as advantages of chat-based approaches (Hewson et al. 2003 p.46; Rudestam, 2001, pp. 248-250).

Sherry Turkle began studying the interaction of humans with computers in the late 70s. She was one of the early proponents of the idea that Internet identity is fluid. She was particularly interested in the idea of embodiment, how objects enter into emotional and cognitive development (Turkle, 1998). While her interest was in the relationship between people and the technology, her concerns parallel the experience of the on-line chat method used in this study. Underneath the description of CMCs as time saving and efficient are all the assumptions about the way we respond because of our interaction with a physical entity. In this research, each of us operated in a domain which had previously only been used for relaxation/pleasure. Her work also challenges the distinction between people and machines, “both people and objects have been reconfigured, machines as psychological objects, people as living machines” (p. 24). Again this is another concept which can’t adequately be examined from this study in that while the interview process with some students took place entirely by machine, other parts of the process such as viewing students’ work, negotiating interview times required a traditional pattern of school interaction.

Further to this, several of the parents of students at our school had expressed their disapproval to me about the amount of time being spent on recreational chatting. The on-line interview method provided legitimacy to an activity that was, at least to some extent, frowned upon and possibly led directly to more recreational chatting as parents were unlikely to know at exactly what time the research interview was completed. One of the students told me that pretending she was chatting to me was her way of gaining a greater proportion of Internet time than her siblings.

Universities are now regularly using discussion lists as a teaching tool. Studies of online surveys began to be published from the end of 1995 (Mann & Stewart, 2004). Some researchers have recently published findings from studies they have done either by “lurking” (observing without participating) or becoming members of user groups such as breast cancer support groups or Goth interest groups and reporting what they found

(Mann, 2004). These findings have only limited usefulness in terms of the CMC method used in this research for a number of reasons. Those CMC users have the capacity for anonymity or contrived or multiple personae whereas the students and I were interacting (if only superficially for some) in another domain, the school context, so we were each known to each other. The published studies I have accessed have generally referred to research occurring in asynchronous time whereas because our chat occurred in real time, it did have the capacity for dynamic interaction.

Paccagnella (In Mann, 2004) has rightly drawn attention to the time taken in typing, reading responses and replying to those responses. Because the students' typing skills were superior to mine and I was fearful of slowing up the process, I would often begin typing my next pre-structured question but would then need to amend it by inserting a direct response once the students' words were downloaded on my screen. A similar process occurred with the students. Sometimes one of us would be responding to something said when a new message would come through, thus the transcripts did not always read logically (see Appendix 7). This evolving form of text poses interesting challenges to our linear concept of reading but as Mann and Stewart purport, "Perhaps CMC loses part of its sense and meaning when reread afterward by those who have not been involved" (Mann, 2004). One of the readers who was verifying data, reported extreme frustration with reading the transcripts. His frustrations stemmed from the amount of text he had to read to gain the point in response to the question I had posed, the disrupted text and the use of overly long nick names, a further disruption to the reading.

A fear has been expressed (Hesse-Biber, 2004) that the capacity of CMCs will allow data-gathering to become volume driven. Seidal coined the term "analytic madness" (In Hesse-Biber, 2004, p. 537) perhaps recognising the potential of the quantity of data one can have access to through the Internet but failing to recognise that the stringent methodological practices need to be implemented whatever the data-gathering tool. He fears that important and interesting detail will be missed (Hesse-Biber, 2004). This research indicates that the advantages of CMCs can be harnessed, *while* attention to a sound theoretical basis, careful research design and close monitoring of the research methods can ensure that close and in-depth research can occur effectively and ethically.

A measure of how dramatic the change of attitude towards the use of the internet as a research tool has been, is the dichotomy between the famous ethnographer, Wolcott who in 1990 is fairly disparaging about its research potential (1990) and the call by researchers ten years later for a “distinctive methodological approach” (Hine, 2000) in order to deal with this “new communication order” (Lankshear, 2000). Albright et al. whose research does focus on the specific use of internet chat in middle school classrooms also argued that this shift needs to occur in attitudes towards classroom use of computer-based technology (2002).

Given my epistemological aims and the theoretical position from which I was working, on-line chat as a data-gathering tool, had several clear advantages.

- Its existing popularity as a medium of communication especially for teenagers
- At present its use is dominated by the young so it requires researchers to work in “their territory” rather than the other way round
- It was a medium which I enjoyed
- Ease of saving transcriptions as documents
- Immediate access to transcripts

The disadvantages in using on-line chat or other CMC methods identified by others (Hesse-Biber, 2004) did not eventuate. Factors which assisted in avoiding these included:

- the controlled setting
- respondents and researcher were known to each other outside the on-line domain
- the project design which delineated clear parameters and required the same ethical and efficacy procedures as in any interview situation

Further to this, the on-line chat proved to be an effective method in collecting the multiplicity of in-depth perspectives needed in this research.

5.8 Data analysis

Various researchers have argued against accepting the positivist premise that data analysis is simply the accurate representation of the data. Rather, they argue for the recognition of creative interaction, of the unconscious and conscious researcher involved in the work of interpretation (Scheurich, 1997; Denzin, 2004). Accepting data analysis in these terms recognizes it as part of the textual journey. The journey began with the cyber and face-to face interviews and proceeded through the process of transcription to print, through my conceptualisation and interpretation of the data according to the parameters of my search, my own assumptions and biases, the academic requirements in which this thesis must be re-presented and then the multiplicity of contextual readings and re-readings. This contextual reading of the data analysis is an essential premise of this research.

After each face-to face interview, I listened to the tape and transcribed it. After each of the on-line interviews, I downloaded the document as it appeared and saved a back up copy as a Word document. Emoticons, the symbolic representation of emotions/greetings, such as a winking face, a smiling face, a half moon to indicate 'goodnight', cannot be transcribed in this way. To add to my data, I often recorded immediate responses of my own in my journal. Occasionally a student would make a comment to me informally. I sometimes recorded these in the journal.

In answering the research questions, I adopted an open coding technique of categorising the data according to concepts emerging from the initial research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.116; Hatch, 2002, p.197). In so doing, I was conscious that the categories while describing the data also interpreted the data (Merriam, 1998, p. 187). The students' responses were not lengthy and although I would often approach an interview with an outline on a particular concept, the conversations sometimes shifted significantly. In general therefore, I coded according to responses, sometime a one-line response, sometimes a paragraph. More often with the online responses, responses overlapped, so I would collate the response that may have been interrupted by my questioning (see 5.7.2).

In examining the data closely and then seeking to locate patterns of meaning, I was following the accepted practice of inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002). Although I was

conscious of a myriad of influential factors on the data the students chose to give me and allow me to interpret, I was aware of the fact that I was using the students' transcripts as text and that there are limitations, both social (see 5.6) and linguistic (see 5.10.1) in using such texts to interpret meaning.

The process of coding was continued as I moved into the domain of what has been termed axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.96). I pondered whether the data supported or discounted my initial questions. I then sought any information from all of the transcripts and supporting documents, (journal and questionnaires) which answered the question either, positively, negatively, or most importantly added "variation and depth of understanding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to my knowledge of this phenomenon. Other concepts, such as "the act of reading" were more "open ended" and my approach more "holistic" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). My goal was to gain insight and understanding, so rather than supportive or negative comments, I would seek responses which contributed to my evolving understanding.

The constructivist orientation informed this process as I sought a multiplicity of viewpoints but the structural framework was provided throughout the data collection and analysis by the research questions. Interpretation permeated every part of the process.

5.9 Credibility

It is a characteristic of constructivist research to accept the multiplicity of viewpoints rather than proving or disproving a particular hypothesis. "Terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity" (Hatch, 2002). I satisfied a number of criteria recommended as techniques for credibility including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and member checks (Guba and Lincoln, 1999, p.147; Hatch, 2002). While qualitative researchers argue for recognition of the contrived nature of quantitative measurement, there were aspects of my research I wanted to verify.

I found the work of Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Bassey (1999) useful in identifying the approach I took to the issue of validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) coined the term

“trustworthiness”. Bassey (1999) further reworked this notion. He used the phrase “the ‘ethical respect for truth’ in case study research” (p. 75) which could be perceived as problematic in terms of a constructivist study which is not claiming to be working towards unravelling a fixed reality. He listed processes such as prolonged engagement with data sources and an adequate audit trail for ensuring this trustworthiness both of which I incorporated in the methodological approaches of validity.

I devised my own “audit trail” which I felt helped me in the research gathering process and added credibility to the results. There were two aspects of the transcripts which were my main source of data which I felt should be verified. I wanted to check the students’ satisfaction or otherwise with the way they had expressed their views as recorded in the transcripts, particularly in light of their own development over a year. This process of having participants respond to what they had originally told me seemed an ethical and effective method of establishing the co-construction of understandings identified as characteristic of the constructivist position (Hatch, 2002, p. 23). Also, while I do not accept that there is one correct interpretation (Wolcott, 1995; Janesick, 2003) I wanted to see whether someone who was not so involved in the field of English teaching and who did not know these students would draw similar conclusions from the transcripts. I was also concerned to minimise the researcher bias when it came to my reading of the students’ language. As a check, I asked two doctoral peers to each check a set of three transcripts against my reported findings and draw their own conclusions in terms of the research questions. They each felt that the findings had been reported accurately but one reader had reservations about the representativeness of my findings (see 5.5.5) and the other expressed extreme frustration in using the on-line chat transcripts as a data-source (see 5.7.2).

In the final weeks of the year of data gathering, I asked the six students who had sustained the year long process to read through their transcripts and jot down any additional thoughts or clarify anything that they felt had been misrepresented or not explained fully enough for their satisfaction. This is one of a number of techniques recognised as helping the process of capturing participants’ perspectives accurately (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

5.10 Data reporting

5.10.1 The students' words as data

In deciding to focus almost entirely on the students' reported experience of set text study, I have attempted to provide a forum for the students' voices to be heard in an educational field that is tipped in favour of other voices: curriculum, leadership, policy, teachers. In so doing, I am conscious that re-presenting text does not constitute a recognition of the dialogism advocated by Bakhtin. While I offer these words as the students' voices, I am creating a new text which is different from the discourse in which the students and I participated (Denzin, 1995). Reporting thought processes as written data, is also problematic in the sense Ong (1967) has identified. The moment of thought when written transcription has occurred is enshrined as "the truth".

The work of Ong (1967) elucidates the problem that is inherent in this and similar research when spoken words are recorded as written words. He defines the problem in terms of our notion that written words are records whereas spoken words are not. He highlights the transitory nature of the experience of using words and the irony that at a moment when these become written they gain additional credence, although the written word can never convey the full understanding and experience of the spoken word and most notably excludes presence. "The word is something that happens, an event in the world of sound through which the mind is enabled to relate actuality to itself" (p 22).

Ong's work on words is far reaching, from his reflection on the intrinsic component of sound (p. 111-138) to the additional characteristics of Chinese lettering (p. 36-38). These particular points are explicitly relevant to this thesis. Obviously the emphasis, the volume, the tone indicating frustration or delight, the accent is absent from the excerpts, but it is more than that. Ong challenges the assumption that, because we have the words we have the meaning. It is the same argument that is behind much that has been written about the experience of reading but perhaps because the assumptions are more deeply embedded in our literate western culture and in particular, within educational institutions, they are less often challenged.

The problem is not specific to the domain of language. Physicists confront the same dilemma in accepting the principle from classical physics in which all of an entity's attributes are in principle accessible to measurement. Yet if quons are observed, they act like particles at the moment of observation, but in between, they act like a wave. Accurate measurement of a single quantum attribute produces imprecision in some other quantum attribute (Herbert, 1985, p.67-68). In this thesis, the recording has occurred at the student's moment of public articulation whether written or spoken. Again Scholes' work is helpful in understanding the essence of this notion in regard to researching students' views. He used the image of waves to illustrate that "waves are not matter, they are energy and power incarnate, moving through matter to their own shape" (Scholes, 1989, p.21). In reading waves, he argued, we make the connection to other waves from books, pictures and experience already textualised in memory. Whether or not students being questioned in the domains described, articulate associations with other textual experiences does not mean that they do not exist. Despite the prolonged engagement and efforts to build a relationship of trust, factors including the pace of on-line chat, the nature of teacher-student relationships and the tendency to provide short answers might have mitigated against that sort of personal revelation.

5.10.2 The recorded data

Miller and Crabtree argue that "cleaning up the data could be done dependent on the original research question and the evolving data" (2004). This was not something I felt able to do. For all the necessity of accepting the printed transcript as a shadow of the full set text experience of any student, I recorded every word that I could decipher in the replaying of the face-to face interviews. I left in interruptions such as the ringing of phones and school bells. I attempted to document hesitations, clarifications when they occurred. From the on-line transcripts, I did adapt some spelling. With speedy typing being integral to effective repartee, many errors occurred. This seemed an unnecessary distraction to the reading. Whether or not students could spell in an interview context was not part of this research. Allowing judgements based on the inclusion of spelling errors, (given the value laden notion of "correct" spelling), seemed to me an example of the privilege in our culture ascribed to print texts over oral texts. I was concerned that

judgements would not be made about students based on incorrect spelling in a domain in which “correct” spelling has no value.

The ten students who agreed to take part in this research had many different reasons for their participation, so it was important to consider how these reasons might have coloured the information that was given to me. It has been noted that the researcher may use the interview experience to satisfy his/her relational needs (Scheurich, 1997). The same is true of the interviewee. I ended the interview process with a questionnaire, part of which gave students the opportunity to say why they had accepted the invitation to be part of the research and how those reasons might have influenced what they felt they could say. It is unlikely that students who felt restricted in what they could say or who had a reason to give a particular sort of answer in the interviews (Gore, 1993, p.151) would feel any differently responding in a final written questionnaire. For instance, Hamish clearly set out to please me; I think he would have felt very uncomfortable at cancelling an interview (although he did forget one!) or not responding to my questions. He often interspersed his responses with positive comments about the school. His response on the final questionnaire as to why he participated in the research reflected this ongoing desire to please: *I just wanted to help Anne with her research.*

5.10.3 Presenting the data and analysis

In the specific selection of extracts from the thousands of spoken words of data which I recorded and transcribed, and chat transcripts which I saved, I have chosen those comments which in my judgement, best provided insight into the particular questions about set text study I was seeking to answer. There is clearly a need to limit what is reported in comparison with what has been learned, not only because of the scope of what can be represented within a thesis, but because the whole story is greater than can be known or told by another (Stake, 2003).

In being true to my understanding of the complexity of the way we read texts and the way we use language, I was anxious to report the data in a way that would allow the reader to recognise some of the complexity inherent in each student’s data. Excerpts of transcribed

speech do not do justice to the theatrical elements of everyday speech. To counter this “alien talk” (Denzin, 1995, p.5), I have endeavoured to present an interpretative text that allows the reader to contextualise these excerpts. At the same time, I am reporting in the first instance, for an academic audience, though not necessarily a homogenous audience, in terms of culture, age, academic disciplines, theoretical perspectives, so creating ease of access by adopting traditional conventions of doctoral thesis organization, seemed worth doing. Hence, in presenting the data to the reader, I have adopted a conventional approach of incorporating extracts from the transcripts within the interpretive discussion. These extracts pertain to key concepts which emerged from the original research questions (Janesick, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The discussion has certainly foregrounded my position as researcher, in that it is I who was interpreting the data and determining which responses most exemplified the points I wished to make.

In choosing to write in first person, I further positioned myself within the research, rejecting any hint of a disembodied researcher reporting objectively in a passive, third person account (Wolcott, 1990; Hatch, 2002). Both Hatch and Wolcott argued that writing in first person rightly locates the researcher as an important part of the study. “The more critical the observer’s role and the subjective assessment, the more important to have that role and presence acknowledged in the reporting” (Wolcott, 1990). Being viewed as a co-creator of the multiple perspectives being presented is an important part of the constructivist position informing this research (Denzin, 1995).

While initially, I sought a balance of Year 9 and 10 students, of boys and girls and of on-line chat interviewees and face to face interviewees, in the end, the selection of data does not represent that balance. The older students had much more to say about representations within the text. The boys were more “dedicated” interviewees. Once the data had been gathered, I did not seek a balance of reporting in the sense of giving equal voice to all students, though I did seek to present alternative perspectives where they existed. I reported the words of the students whose comments seemed to me to elucidate the phenomenon I was studying. The silences, the cancelled interviews may have been telling me a great deal, but I opted to incorporate excerpts from the transcripts from which I felt most could be learned. Stake has written in some detail on the primary importance of capacity to learn from case studies which he argues, overrides other important considerations such as balance and variety (2003).

Although little has been written about real time chat lines by researchers who have used this tool, there certainly have been questions raised about its lack of potential for anything beyond transcribed speech. Hewson, Yule, Laurent & Vogel (2003) argued that there is not much scope for using extra-linguistic cues in on-line transactions. Utz (in Batinic et al., 2002) reported that “computer mediated communication has often been deemed impersonal and unsuitable for the exchange of socio-emotional contexts” (p.277) Like Utz, I found that this was disproved in my study. Not only did the students use emoticons, very telling nicknames, acronyms and highly personalised fonts to indicate emotion and personality, but the content of their discourse reflected warmth, humour and depth in a way that is indicative of a level of ease and a personal relationship.

It seems to me that the script being used by regular on-line chat users such as the five young people in this study, is more in keeping with the “true script” identified by Ong (1967), which he saw as much more than “an assortment of isolated signs” and described as “an organised system which in one way or another undertakes rather to represent concepts themselves directly (p36)”. In the culture of on-line chat, the communicative experience is much richer than the transcript.

Mann and Stewart reported on studies which seem to indicate that close examination of the linguistic and extra-linguistic clues of on-line discourse might further the deeper aims of qualitative research (2004). To simply see the result of an on-line interview as the transcription, particularly if it has been saved as a word document, and re-presented in a formal style which might be set by academic or publishing limitations, is the equivalent of seeing a face to face interview as the words typed out from a tape-recorded interview. Both transcriptions need to be read contextually.

Once again Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism informs this process of understanding text, not as “a firm and certain re-presentation,” not as a cinematic or visual text, but as a lived interpretative textuality. As Denzin has reminded us, seeing is different from understanding (1995, p. 7). A visual transcript alone does not provide understanding. I have intended in this thesis to present the possibility for understanding as described by Ong, “Understanding is visceral. The fully interpretive text plunges the reader into the interior, feeling, hearing...and touching worlds of human perception” (In Denzin, 1995, p. 7).

5.10.4 Overview

Chapter 5 explains the basic constructivist position which underlies this thesis. I have sought to elucidate some of the apparent contradictions of the thesis. Some of the concerns of this study stem from a positivist viewpoint, yet as a teacher and reader in the early 2000s, my ideas have been very much influenced by the postmodern perspective on our culture. In this chapter, the decision to adopt a qualitative approach and specifically a bounded case study is explained by describing the particular characteristics which influenced my choice.

The discussion provides some insight into the more intrinsic tension of reporting qualitative research that has to do with the way we perceive language as capturing reality. In all fields, there are limitations in attempting to assess/measure/ quantify/ describe something. There are particular difficulties when one is attempting to describe concepts as personal and potentially subconscious as “attitudes”, “associations” or “experience” while using a public discourse. This research accepts the transient and individualistic components of meaning-making. It is because it is understood that the experience of studying a text is different for each student in the class, that research which seeks to understand the depth of individualistic experience matters so much.

6 The experience of set text study

6.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the students as readers in their non-school lives. Although the focus of the reading experience being studied was a school phenomenon, the inter-textual experience of school reading is obviously influenced by other textual experiences but specifically by reading experiences prior to school entry and by non-school reading.

In reporting the analysis and findings, I have organised these according to the original questions. Chapter 6 deals with the students' responses to questions pertaining to both the personal and social experience of set text study, including the students' perceived value of both the reading and accompanying activities of set text study. In Chapter 7, the findings are focussed on the fourth and fifth research questions, which seek to find out if set text study could in any way contribute to a student's emerging sense of identity.

I alluded earlier (see 5.10.3) to the way that I had intertwined the students' voices with my own reflective and interpretive comments. I have presented the students' words in italics. By not using quotation marks, I am intending to facilitate ease for the reader. It also seems more in keeping with the constructivist framework I have adopted, accepting the subjectivity of both the students and my understanding of reality, and also acknowledging the 'createdness' of this particular text. What is being reported, both the students' words and my thoughts exist because of this act of research.

6.2 *The students as readers in their non-school lives*

Brayden, Patrick, Skye, Georgia and Chelsea are the pseudonyms given to the five younger students who took part in this research. These students were part way through Year 9 when the study commenced and halfway through Year 10 when it finished. The Year 10 students are, in this study, named Kimberley, Madison, Gary, Martin and Hamish and were halfway through Year 11 when the research period ended. This meant they were

in the first six months of doing their VCE, the final school certificate. The selection process has been outlined (see 5.5.5).

Apart from the brief descriptions given by teachers and the informal chat when I was initially meeting students, I had no information about these students. I was happy to commence the project with as little pre-judgement as possible. Over the course of the interviews though, I was trying to establish a picture of the students as readers and viewers of school and non-school texts.

Patrick, Brayden, Georgia, Kimberley and Gary, each commenced the research, identifying themselves as readers. Hamish was in a group of students identified as at the lower end of the academic scale and perceived as a non-reader, although his comments suggest in several ways the judgements may have been inaccurate. Skye, although she said she had read in the past, claimed that she did not read any non-school books during the six months she participated in the research. Martin's descriptions of his reading by choice centred on utilitarian aspects of reading, reading for information, particularly in his field of cars and mechanics. Madison and Chelsea both identified themselves as hating reading, although in one instance, I found this not to be the case with Madison, and often not the case with Chelsea.

When I asked students about non-school activities, I was surprised at how little importance was placed on film viewing. A couple of the boys identified the release of each of the "Lord of the Rings" films as anticipated events, but in general, going to films was an occasional rather than a regular activity. Similarly, TV watching and recreational computer usage featured much less frequently in the students' lives than I had imagined.

Gary, whom I had perceived as an enthusiastic computer user and whose mother complained about the amount of time he spent on the computer was the exception in his computer use of more than an hour a day. However his comments suggest that he was selective in his computer usage: *I tend to go for ones [games] that require lateral thinking and really good stories.* Gary said that he *loathed television and the radio rarely has anything that interests me, just pop music, which I also loathe.*

Several of the girls identified social reasons for using the computer or watching television, but if the friends weren't there, the solitary occupations held little value for them. Typical of this response was Kimberley who said:

Well I don't actually watch much television anymore, the movies I go to occasionally... I probably only spent an hour on the computer for the whole holidays... apart from MSN! Nope! [to playing computer games]. I play on the Nintendo over at my neighbour's place, but that's with 4 of us there to yell and scream together...I need to be able to interact with other people...computer games and TV bore me.

I was surprised by the apparent lack of enjoyment attributed to computer games, though Patrick, Madison, Kimberley, Chelsea, Skye and Gary were all keen MSN users. Brayden's comment sheds some light on his reasoning behind this lack of enjoyment. When being questioned on his computer usage, Brayden made a telling comparison.

I just get more enjoyment out of it [reading] I don't know, I'm just learning a lot more out of reading a book. I get issues, more themes out of it than sitting watching a blank screen playing arcade games all night.

The two studies on teenage reading practices which have been undertaken in Australia in recent years suggest that these students are not unusual. Each of these reports gives some indication of the way some groups of young people perceive themselves as readers. Manuel and Robinson (2002) reported that around a quarter of the 69 respondents rate reading as "a first preference leisure activity" (p. 72). In her introduction to the national research project, *Young Australians Reading: From keen to reluctant readers*, Agnes Nieuwenhuisen (2001) identified one of the key findings: "Young people claim that they read for pleasure no less frequently than they play computer games or use the internet" (p.1). I found this to be the case with the majority of the students in my study. However, such specific measures were not undertaken in my research. What my research did allow to emerge were some of the reasons for the students' choices.

The longitudinal nature of my study shows how such things as a student's patterns of reading or computer usage can shift markedly during the period of a year (see 6.4),

particularly during the critical years of 15 to 17 years when social development is so rapid.⁴

6.3 The cumulative experience

As I was formulating the questions, I was wondering about the potential of literary representations to effect some change in a student reader. As I became more conscious of the repetition of some of the literary representations such as negative portrayals of adult characters or acts of suicide, I wondered whether repetition of some representations would increase the likelihood of student readers being affected by their set text reading.

Perhaps one of the most telling observations of this research into students' experience of set text study, was the difficulty many of the students had in recalling the actual texts they had studied in the lower levels of secondary school. Madison told me, "*I can't remember any of the names of the books let alone the characters*". Similarly, Hamish said he really couldn't say much about overall set text study for him, "*it's kinda hard, it's a bit hard to think, it was so long ago*". I was interested to find out, if this was specific to these students or a broader trend. At the beginning of the 2003 academic year, I asked the students in each of my Year 10 classes to recall the texts they had studied during secondary school. They seemed to have equal difficulty, though, with promptings from others, most students in the end, compiled a list of four or five texts. In reality, they had studied between eight and twelve by this time in their secondary school lives.

In contrast to this vagueness about texts studied in the past, the students from the study commented quite specifically on the texts they were studying at the time of the interview. This might not be all that surprising, but it does seem to challenge my original concern about the cumulative effect of the literary representations within set text study. While I began by wondering about the impact of repeated representations, it would seem that many students are only vaguely conscious of a cumulative experience.

⁴ Patrick, the keenest reader in this study told me how his time use had really shifted since the study. Much of his reading time has given way to socialising, sport, more homework and more interesting computer games.

Brayden, one of the younger interviewees, was a student who, at the end of Year 9, felt there had been “*a lot of variety*”, but he also felt there had been a definite trend in the early years of set text study.

*There’s definitely a pattern with them. Like, occasionally you’ll come across an issue like **Bridge to Terebithia**. I don’t know whether the whole Year 7 thing was meant to be based around grief, but the books in Year 7... We had **Bridge to Terebithia** with Lesley dying and **Goodbye Vietnam** where the boat people died in the boat and what was the other one...? I can’t think of it but it centred on grief. Sometimes with other texts, you’ll have issues mildly come up but it’s not the central issue. So it depends what the books is.*

Gary recalled:

*In Year 8, both of the set texts, **Goodbye Vietnam** and **Wolf** were about running from war. **Goodbye Vietnam** was Vietnamese refugees going to Japan to escape the Khmer Rouge. **Wolf** was set in Ireland, about an IRA soldier’s daughter.*

In contrast to these two students, Martin described set texts as being “*all over the place*”.

6.4 The perceived value of set text study

Kimberley was one of the students who felt she had benefited from her set text study.

Overall a great experience because it encouraged my reading definitely, but it’s also broadened my thinking.

I guess I’ve learnt to actually look further into books. There are assumptions to be made...an over analysis of a book can ruin it, but simply looking further into a book can just help you enjoy it more.

Interestingly though, as soon as the opportunity arose to study a non-novel based English, (VCE English Language), Kimberley took it. In reflecting on this, she felt “the reading

didn't really fit" into her busy schedule. When I asked her about non-school reading in the final term of the data gathering, she told me her only reading at that time was her Learner's book⁵, a comment reflecting one of the major preoccupations of those in the school who had turned 16, but also interesting in terms of the intense and enjoyable experiences reading had provided for her in previous years.

Although *Tomorrow When the War Began* has often been set as a text, Kimberley read it independently and felt that reading it as a class text would have detracted.

Books don't seem to be as enjoyable if I have to sit in class (in uncomfortable seats too) and listen to people read it to me. Especially slower readers, they kinda ruin the story.

Martin expressed a similar view. When I was asking him about what was happening as he started reading a book, his need to clarify whether it was a school or non-school book, demonstrated this.

Martin: *I s'pose, well is this for a school book or at home?*

Anne: *So do you have a different answer?*

Martin: *Yeah... with at school, it seems good to get halfway through it because then you've got the feeling that there's not much to go. When you're reading at home, it's a book that you'd actually choose, so you're more happy to read that.*

Anne: *So is reading the start of it different?*

Martin: *A little bit. I think you're into it more if it's something you can choose yourself.*

Gary disagreed with this view. He felt the fault with set text study lay with the choice of texts, but enjoyment wouldn't diminish by having to study a particular text in school. When Gary ranked *Catcher in the Rye* (non-school reading) at 9 ½ out of 10, I asked him if it would retain this ranking if it were set as a school text. *Absolutely*. When I pressed him to consider whether the sorts of activities he was required to do could add to his

⁵ In the state of Victoria, people are able to gain their Learner's permit at the age of 16. This enables them to drive with a fully licensed driver. The Learner's book is a reference book on road rules.

enjoyment, he reiterated the view that the choice of text was paramount. *Maybe, but I think the book holds the strongest factor. Some of the tasks can be a bit monotonous and boring, but that's not the problem.*

Madison said that she had *always hated reading* and yet she was one of the less critical students of set text study. She described *Deadly Unna* which she had studied at the beginning of Year 10, as the only book she had ever enjoyed, though she had difficulty in expressing why this was the case. Madison wasn't bothered by the fact that as it was a class set which had to be returned at the end of the lesson, she couldn't borrow it out overnight. Although the sequel was available in the school library, Madison didn't borrow it. A year and a half later, she reported to me that she had not read another book since *Deadly Unna*. Clearly the single experience of enjoyment of novel reading was not enough to entice Madison to read more (Ryan, 2001). Being disenfranchised from the main business of what was happening in English classes did not seem to distress Madison. She accepted it as part of her lot at school. *I just accept it. I know I have to do it, but I don't enjoy it all.*

The aspect of school life which really seemed to matter to Madison was the way she was treated by staff. As well as this, she liked being able to have some say over her learning. She commented on two individual units, one of these, an Anthology unit was her favourite, *cause it had no novels and we could work at our own pace, we got to study a subject that we enjoyed, so we put in 100%* and in the other, the teacher had gone on leave just as they started a book and when she returned, she seemed to have forgotten about it. Madison reasoned that she could only ever do well if she enjoyed what she was doing. *I have to enjoy it or I won't put any effort into if I don't enjoy it.* The big difference reported by Madison in having to study a book she liked was *I sort of looked forward to going to class.* The obvious implication of such an understatement is disturbing.

Chelsea was another student who said she hated reading the set text, (although sometimes she said she got into *a reading type mood*), but extraneous motivation ensured that she did read the texts.

I read it and hate every page. Well if I don't read it, then I obviously won't be able to do none of da (sic) tasks, so I read it. Yes...in a way I am motivated to pass the subject, only because if I don't then I have my mobile taken away.

Several students articulated an appreciation for being introduced to a genre or individual story that they would never have come across otherwise. Although Gary's overall view of set texts was so damning, he shared this appreciation at least in one instance. Gary reported:

*With all the set texts so far, none of them have made me look at them twice, I just read them and put them down. [A month later he clarified], I think the only book I enjoyed, that I hadn't already read, was **Mrs Frisby and the Rats of Nimh**. If I wasn't forced to read that in year 7, then I never would have looked at that genre and never learned from it.*

Gary placed a high value on books in general. *There are always more books with more to learn from them.* Although Gary was the student who seemed most critical of set text study as he had experienced it, though he struggled to find the words, he did say:

I'd be less ... something ... about books. But other than that, I can't really see a great difference, just can't think of the words, sorry ...

At the end of the interview process when he was re-reading his transcripts, this was one of the points on which he expanded.

I think what I could find to say was something like "worldly experience" except in literary form. I know more than I ever would have without them. It also helps me identify good books a lot easier, just by comparison. Now I know to try new writings and see what happens.

This could be an example of the emotional development that had occurred during the 14 months (Appleyard, 1990) in which Gary participated in the research. In other ways his attitudes seemed to have softened to a less critical stance. However, his comments on the library may well have been prompted by the physical rearrangement that had occurred. To

my eye, the fiction was placed more appealingly and certainly in a more noticeable position. At the time of the interviews Gary was very dismissive:

I notice that at the Senior Campus, the fiction section is very small. I never bother borrowing. Most of them don't strike up my interest. There is one every now and then, but I promptly forget about it on leaving the library.

At the end of the interview period, he wrote on his transcript, *the last couple of years, it's gotten pretty nice.*

6.5 Learning activities associated with set texts

In trying to ascertain what constituted set text study for these students, I asked them about how the book was read and the nature of the activities they were required to do. Students reported a variety of approaches towards the actual reading of set texts. Martin preferred having a single reader when the book was to be read out loud. *The teacher reads most often but calls for volunteers sometimes. It's a bit harder to picture the story in your head when it changes because someone else is reading.* Patrick's teacher adopted a similar approach but for Patrick, being chosen as one of the readers clearly enhanced his enjoyment. *Sometimes the teacher would read, sometimes we would get assigned characters. I was assigned to Bottom. I thought it was funny...the donkey...and interesting.* Brayden too enjoyed the shared reading that was part of his Shakespeare study, but seemed to particularly value it as performance.

We were doing the shared reading...and we used to alternate that around a bit and it was so much fun just reading the script we had. It was good.

I guess it's more fun because you're able to share it and you'll have people listening to you and you only, so that's a bit of fun.

As the work of my thesis intensified, I became so much more conscious of my own reading practices and how much talk about books, particularly the urge to share a good book was a feature of my life. Reading the work of Pradl (1996) whose work centres on

the value of democratic processes in the classroom and that of Sumara (1996; 2002) and Van der Hoevan (1999; 2002) who formed adult reading groups with their research teachers in order to relate what was happening in classrooms to the way we “do books” as adults, heightened my awareness of the potential of classrooms for being shared reading spaces. Yet the results students reported were disappointing.

Class discussions were mentioned as a regular feature of class activities, but for a variety of reasons, a number of the students spoke disparagingly of them. Georgia was one who described the discussions as *not very good*.

Can hardly remember them. I don't think our teacher was very interested, or some of the students, so we were never motivated to take part in the discussion. If people aren't motivated they're boring.

Kimberley talked in detail about how much a successful discussion for her depended upon feeling comfortable with the group. Although at different times throughout the research period, she expressed the yearning to have her own ideas counted, her discussion during one unit demonstrated the limitations of the shared reading space for her.

I'm more inclined to join in class discussions in subjects other than English at the moment simply because of the people in the class. I like class discussions where I can express my point of view...no offence to some people like, say Suzy, but they talk for the sake of arguing with other people's opinions.

None of the students reported the sort of positive interaction presented in some of the literature (Morgan, 1997, p. 108). Joanne, one of the teachers in *Crossing Over* (Foster, 2002,) alternated between a highly controlled classroom discussion, seats placed in a circle and the discussion directed by her, and small group discussion. The significant difference was that these were students who had chosen to read the same book. In the whole class discussion, the focus tended to be individual response and personal recommendations (p.70).

Generally students were critical of the discussion process that occurred in their classrooms. The dominance of some students, the boredom factor (including the

teacher's), the unruliness, all seemed to be perceived as detractors from the process. The students who were less critical were, not surprisingly, the two who for some units were part of an advanced English unit. One student spoke of the acceptability of talking about books amongst this group. The other student Patrick, whose entire experience of set text study was reported positively, loved the interaction to do with shared reading practices. The reactions of others were interesting to him. He encouraged his reading friends to read books he had enjoyed and wanted his friends to share his pleasure. When he read to his younger brother he reported that it provided him with the double pleasure of re-reading the text for himself and gaining the enjoyment his brother was experiencing from the story and from being read to.

Kimberley was one of the students who, though she had initially expressed difficulty in recalling texts was, throughout the interview process, able to recall all those she had studied and was able to discuss some activities associated with some particular texts. In a Year 8 text, *Channeary*, she recalled they had had to answer *lots of questions which really tested our knowledge of the characters...we had to create Channeary's village at one point too*. Her overall memory though was of the *basic text response*.

The text responses are pretty much the same for all books, some of them are essays but in younger years, we got questions to answer on the text about the characters, the setting, any hidden meaning in the book, that kinda stuff.

For all her apparent boredom with the *basic text response*, and her cynical view of why they might be set, *you learn skills sure...but it's a bit of overkill...it's mainly a time filler, I think*, Kimberley was prepared to acknowledge that it offered her more scope than *set questions*. *Essays allow you to actually express opinions and beliefs on the stories a little more...set questions allow no room for creativeness in your writing.*

In examining the kind of work that schools can do with narrative, Misson has taken issue with the unquestioning use of the personal text response; "it is necessary to get away from privileging the seeming purity of the undiscussed text response"(1998. p. 111). Misson argued for a closer examination of technique (and in doing so, pointed out the irony of teachers accepting this as part of teaching film analysis, but not literary analysis). It is his view that explicit teaching which occurs alongside the consideration and reflection of a

shared reading experience will result in more sophisticated and complex responses that are more in line with the goal of “strong and diverse understandings of the texts read” (p. 108-112).

Although Gary recognized the sameness of the tasks, he was less cynical about the reason for the set text tasks, *to develop our writing skills*, and wanted it to be better than it could have been a year previously.

My essay got an A whereas last year, I most likely would have failed. The piece's outstanding lateness got me an S though. It is the same stuff, but I had to use what I didn't know last year. Like, I don't know, more experience and knowledge has to be put into it, or I won't have done anything.

Patrick similarly felt he was being required to do more than respond.

Yes, we were shown how to do it and then we had to do it on our own, well we learn about people's reactions, we have to do persuasive essays. You have to think a lot beyond the actual story.

Brayden too, reported on the predictability of the tasks.

I think some of the assessment tasks could be more varied. They all involve the characterization, the scenes, the usual things.... I don't know personally what the new assessments could be, but they do seem the same....

When he was showing me a task sheet he had been given in a unit where he had a free choice of text, Brayden said, *it's ok...it doesn't really vary from what you do with every book experience after you've done the first one*. As with Kimberley, Brayden was critical of the lack of opportunity for having his own view heard, and saw the value of essays in providing scope for this.

With set texts, you're going to get the same answer with characters and that. And there's not much of an opinion in that sort of thing. You only get 5 or 6 essays. That might sound a fair bit, but I'd rather 15 or 16...a lot more.

Even Gary who said he *didn't have a ball of a time writing essays* felt *they would make it more interesting*. He stated that he hated ***Romeo and Juliet*** but felt it could have been made more interesting by *an analysis of Romeo and Juliet's relationship*, but added, *I wouldn't be as pleased as I would to do the same thing with Holden Caulfield*. Similarly he said that if ***Crossroads of Twilight*** were the set text, he'd *be over the moon*. When I asked him how it would be if he'd had to do essays, class discussion, comprehension on these books, he said, *it would be really easy. I know these books like the back of my hand*.

Madison recalled,

All we used to do was essays and stories and stuff. It was all structured. The most enjoyable unit I did was anthology in Year 9 'cause it had no novels and we could work at our own pace.

Tests were mentioned occasionally by students and not surprisingly seemed to be an affirming experience for the better readers and a disheartening experience for the weaker readers. Brayden described a test he did while studying a unit on ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***.

There were two parts to it. The first part was just the basics (Who are the lovers? Where is it set?), and the second part was more on characters and interpretation. It was a pretty easy test, but it was the second part that took more thought and you had to put in your opinions. I like doing that. I think some people find that hard.

In contrast, Hamish described his performance on a comprehension test much less positively. *I did a bit poorly. I didn't remember it. It was 2 months after we started reading it.*

Specific tasks caused enormous difficulty for some students. The frustration was still evident in the way Brayden spoke of the creative tasks he was required to do in ***The Hobbit*** unit.

I can't get an image of these creatures in my head. What we're doing at the moment...draw a portrait. It's visual, but I don't have one in my head...when she says imagine, that's when I get lost. I can't get the image of a hobbit. I think of him as a hobbit...he doesn't mean anything.

Many of the tasks students described assumed they had the necessary skills to complete the task. Explicit teaching was reported as the exception rather than the norm. This was problematic for students in two senses. Some did not feel they ever learnt to do the tasks and others felt having learnt the tasks they were doing the same thing, unit after unit.

Wilhelm has described his process of teaching textual experiences of complex conventions such as irony. He starts with a simple text such as a cartoon text and moves through shorter and simpler examples to longer and more subtle forms. (Wilhelm, 1997). It would seem that such direct instruction is probably necessary for many students to understand texts that make use of complex conventions. It was evident that students valued and clearly remembered situations where they were explicitly taught or shown possibilities for completing set tasks. Gary recalled how a teacher

taught me how to write stories and put words onto paper. She sat me down and told me to write the first thing that came up. Then I had to elaborate on it and write from there.

Hamish recalled:

I don't know with T. He copied out bits and pieces from the book of the books and um printed them onto paper so we had stuff to go through and he did most of the questions on what he'd printed off, so it was a bit easier to retrace instead of having to read through the book a second time.

A number of writers report on the need for explicit teaching (McGregor, 1989; Wilhelm 1997) of the skills students are expected to learn. McGregor is critical of the fact that many teachers who would themselves never have written a book review, frequently expect students to do so. A great deal of work was done in the mid 1980s to early 1990s highlighting the benefits to students if teachers were to write with their students. (Atwell,

1987; Romano, 1987; Gleeson & Prain, 1996). One of the perceived benefits was the capacity it gave teachers to respond as co-writers offering the specific advice and strategies that Gary and Hamish identified as valuable.

Having a choice of tasks was mentioned only occasionally. Martin reported that he had a choice between a creative response and a text response. He chose the creative task thinking it would be fun but also argued, as he did in other contexts too, that you learn more by doing

We wrote out a scene and we changed it to the way we wanted it. It was good, Everyone understood it a lot differently, than if we just read it. You could change it to how you wanted it...You tend to write an essay not thinking as much, but if you're doin' a role play, you're gunna act it and you know what it's gunna be like.

Multi-media adjuncts to reading the set text were not seen positively by some of the students. Two criticisms were made of the requirement to listen to audio recordings (taped books) of the texts. Viewing the film *Looking for Alibrandi* as a lead in to the set text proved a real problem for Martin. Interestingly, he said it was seeing the movie which prompted his re-reading, but he was critical of the fact that in class they had watched the movie prior to reading the book. *Watching the movie beforehand, rather than after, the way we did in class didn't seem right.* Martin felt this set up too much of a given in terms of the visualization of the story. In describing the exam essay, he said he chose *the one on a sense of fulfilment. I responded to different parts of the book, the different things she's gone through. Certain ones stick in your mind...pictures cause we watched the movie as well.* Even at the end of the semester, Martin still seemed frustrated by the tension of being required to be examined on the book when the visual impact of the movie had been so strong. Even though,

the teacher kept reminding us "remember you're being examined on the book, not the movie", a lot of people did the exam on the movie. It's easy to get mixed up. The book explained a lot more, but the movie was a lot clearer and a lot easier, cause you got a visual picture of it.

By far the greatest number of learning and assessment tasks reported by students were linear print texts. The only reported use of computers was for word-processing or creating PowerPoint presentations. It is possible that this tendency is re-enforced by the placement of English as its own Key Learning Area as distinct from the Arts. Beavis has discussed the possibility that “literary parameters might confine tasks away from notions of ‘production’ (Beavis, 1995, p.42).

Most of the tasks reported by students, reflected a view of text as having some inherent truth in them, a ‘correct’ reading. It seemed that students were being asked to discover and remember the meaning of the text being studied. Only one comment by Brayden suggested a more critical view in that students were being asked to consider the way they as readers were being positioned in relation to characters.

*So far this semester there’s been short responses so far. Last semester, we had to do an exam on **Looking for Alibrandi** and we had to describe the relationships between each of the characters and whether there were negative or positive connotations in each one.*

Gary who was perhaps the most highly engaged reader, was able to offer a resistant position. When questioned on students’ likely response to repeated suicide representation in the texts, Gary’s response (see 7.4) reflected a high level of critical awareness. Yet his own and his teacher’s reports of disengagement from class activities, suggest that it is unlikely he gained this skill in the classroom.

In his work on set texts, Wilhelm also found that the nature of many of the tasks set in school reinforce the notion of reading as decoding rather than a creative act of meaning-making. His concern that is reinforced by the student responses of this study is that this view reinforces the notion of a correct reading with the result that resistant reading is less likely to happen.

Vivien and Nicholl (In Saxby 1987, p 370) discuss the value of literature in terms not only of, "nourishing souls and imaginations, but providing a sound sense of story, an awareness of the different kinds of language patterns which authors have used over the centuries", many of which they will be required to use throughout their lifetime. Many

Victorian teachers would identify this aspect as a key focus in the learning outcomes they are hoping to achieve. Several students in Ryan's study identified "learning Shakespearean language" as something of value to be learned (2000, p.10). In this study, I did not seek answers specifically on this aesthetic dimension but students did not report activities that focussed on the language or aesthetic components of texts.

6.6 The classroom

The contemporary secondary English classroom as a unique cultural artefact, understood in its complexity, at least from a teacher's viewpoint has been effectively described (Morgan, 1997, p 106-107). In trying to ascertain students' attitudes to being in such a classroom, I asked them about their feelings as they approached their class.

When I first asked Brayden this question, he was enrolled in a fantasy unit he hated. He told me he *dreaded going to class*. As Brayden was one of the students recommended to me as both an able reader and a student who would share his ideas, I was stunned by how much this experience affected him. It impacted on his confidence to such an extent that many of his later comments were made in relation to this negative experience. In his final interview, he told me, *I used to like English, it was just when I went into that topic with fantasy, now I'm out of that*. Brayden had had four successful units prior to this one bad experience; it seemed to take him a year to recover to confidently express his love of the subject English.

Gary said that as he walks towards class, he considers alternative activities, *Oh yay English. I have to find a more quiet method of stuffing around with Steve and Adam*. In a more reflective mood he said, *I hope all the way that for some reason we will have to do something else, not related to the book at all. Dictating, spelling tests anything*. His unease increases as the long-term implications of set text study set in.

When the author fails to get you in and you have to do a whole unit, I'm thinking something along the lines of "How can I get out of this? Or, Make it stop, please!!!! I really don't want to work for 6 or 7 weeks on a book I don't like.

Chelsea described what happens as she reads along in class. *Drip...Drip...* Her mind wanders, she says, *to things no-one wants to know*. A number of students identified varying ability levels as the reason for their negative response. As well as ability level, Brayden also felt that personal taste was a crucial factor in this.

*It depends I think. In English classes, students can be divided into categories. One category is the straight A students that continuously gain good marks and are not afraid to share this with people. Then there's the category of people that don't bother to study and just don't mind what marks they get, while there's the people that try so hard but get low marks. I'll gladly talk to anyone who's interested in the text, but generally you stay to your own "group" so as to not dishearten the people that aren't so good. Different people have different expectations of novels and books. Tolkein and Shakespeare are a perfect example. There's one person in my class [English] all the way through, now he loved **The Hobbit** but hated **Shakespeare**, so it really depends who you are talking to.*

Georgia's frustration with having to constantly contend with a curriculum she perceived as being designed for students of lower ability levels permeated her responses in a number of areas. *Yeah, most of the classes are geared at lower levels, it's OK if it's a good book, but if it's not one that's fantastic, you get very bored and have no drive*. To some extent the content and processes of the English curriculum seemed to be determined by the school systems/structure, so potential solutions such as mini-sets could be thwarted by factors such as location or the method of doing school booklists. Classes of most faculties are generally taught in the same room. English is considered a more mobile subject so programs such as those modelled in *Crossing Over* (Foster, 2002) are more difficult to emulate. There are no safe storage areas for mini-sets or filing systems within the classrooms.

In contrast to Georgia, Patrick loved the subject English. This was evident not just in the way he spoke so positively about the texts, but also in his exuberance for every aspect of the subject, from teachers to texts to tasks. Part of the pleasure for Patrick was in having others share in it. This was evident in the way he wanted others to enjoy *The Hobbit* as he had.

*That's probably because I like it personally, but it's a really good book...and I think a lot of people should read it and I'd hope they enjoy it, With the sequels, **Lord of the Rings**...a lot of people read it and a lot of people think you should read it at least once in your life.*

Patrick was the student who seemed to gain most satisfaction from the shared study of reading. He said that it was a similar thing to talking about a game after you've both watched it. *I like the idea of choosing your own, but with set texts, the whole class can follow it. We can talk about it a lot more. You can talk about the same things.* In my second interview with Patrick, he was looking forward to going to see **Lord of the Rings** with his class which would have been his second viewing. He identified seeing the reactions of his peers as one of the reasons for this anticipation.

In trying to think of the classroom as a potential for a shared reading experience, I was interested to see in what way students perceived teachers as readers, but with the exception of Georgia, no student had ever seen a teacher reading apart from class requirements. For Kimberley this seemed to echo an authority structure in the classroom, *perhaps it's a case of do as I say, not do as I do.* Yet she was the only student who reported an explicitly personal response from a teacher to a specific text.

I knew that my teacher hated Channeary because she actually talked to us after the class a bit and told us that, but as she read the book...she would put these emotions in her voice. That made me see how much she actually hated that part of the book...sarcasm maybe, she just kind of spat some words out. It was all in the tone of her voice.

Gordon Pradl's (1994) distinction between primary and secondary acts of reading (p. 234) proves a useful distinction in analysing exactly what these students perceive their teachers as doing. As he sees the problem, students do not get to see their teachers engaged in that first stumbling, exploratory act of reading but rather the teacher has already assumed expert status by pre-reading the text and coming to the class as the expert. A similar challenge was posed to teachers in the early 1990s when they were urged to be co-writers with their students. Unfortunately, some of the potential of the practice was lost as

teachers perceived they were being dictated to from academia and so rejected the practice (Murray, 1985, Gillespie, 1991; Sudol & Sudol, 1991; Gleeson, 1993; Robbins, 1992).

In an earlier study, I examined the notion of English teachers as practitioners of their subject (Gleeson, 1993). Sometimes in a classroom a teacher would write with his or her students. The students could see what it entailed for a teacher to brainstorm possibilities, to make a false start, to come out with a piece that didn't do what one had hoped. For similar reasons, I would support Pradl's view that students would benefit from seeing us as reading practitioners rather than book experts.

However our history of set texts study tends to operate from a framework of answers rather than enquiry. A teacher may have read a text as part of text selection process, or at least as a prelude to planning a sequence of lessons. It would seem that none of the students saw teachers as part of that shared initial reading experience. Several of their comments alluded to their "expert" status. Only one student ever saw a teacher reading a book for her/his own pleasure. How much more beneficial might it be for these students if they were to engage with the teacher in that first reading stage, so that students could become better equipped at the process of reading. "Interpretation thus becomes richer or poorer, not true or false" (Pradl, 1994, p.240-241).

Although Kimberley's report of her teacher's response did not sound like a primary act of reading, it did sound like a genuine response. It sounded like the kind of response that challenges the privileged notion of school texts and creates a space for more genuine exploration of unsatisfying reading experiences.

Given the range of processes a teacher is required to enact in a classroom, it is not surprising that when it comes to the one area over which s/he has some control, (knowledge of the text) s/he will exert that control. The students' responses do not generally indicate an expectation of teachers as co-readers and only occasionally suggest that this is the case. To present as co-reader/learner rather than as expert would require a huge personal and cultural shift. But perhaps students such as Hamish and Madison would have benefited from seeing their teacher's first faltering attempts at meaning-making.

I set out to find out what the experience of studying texts was like for the students but so often their reactions to events or books were phrased in terms of what teachers did.

One student expressed his shock at realizing that the teacher who seemed so into what was happening could not even remember the name of her/his “best” student from a previous year. The student was perhaps discovering Sumara’s premise that “great teachers love what they are teaching more than they love their students” (2002).

6.7 Individual reading processes

6.7.1 The act of reading

As the interview process progressed, it seemed that students came to see that one of my real interests was in what was happening for them when they were reading. But it was only the stronger readers who seemed able to put words around this experience. This was the case even when they were not engaged by a particular book, whereas, the weaker readers struggled to describe either experience.

Both Pradl (1994, 1996) and Wilhelm (1997) found this linguistic difference reflected a much deeper difference in the students’ actual processes when reading. Pradl’s research builds on Rosenblatt’s distinction between reading for information (efferent reading) and reading engagement (aesthetic reading). There are many similarities between the responses of the students in the research of both Pradl and Wilhelm and this research. One of the most obvious is this distinction in what is actually done in the act of reading.

It is interesting that the language of the more engaged readers often reflects the language of action. The verbs used in their responses are telling indicators. The engaged readers saw themselves to some extent, as actively participating in the reading process and indeed, saw non-readers as not doing what was needed, to have the successful reading experience.

Patrick reported that when he starts a new book, *I have to get into it first*. Martin said, *If I didn’t form pictures in my head, I’d have to keep going back over it*.

When Brayden failed to engage with *The Hobbit* in any way, he expressed his frustration in terms of what he couldn't do. *I can't get the image of a hobbit...I think of him as a hobbit...it doesn't mean anything, my mind doesn't accept it.*" Similarly when he was commenting on the irony of loving a book about cats (*The Forest* by Sonya Hartnett), as opposed to hobbits, he gave being able to relate to the characters as a reason for liking the book so much.

Madison was one of the students with whom I most enjoyed working on a social level. She was a bright, communicative student. Our relationship quickly expanded from on-line chatting to a comfortable teacher-student friendship in the schoolyard. Her written English skills were competent. She attained above average scores in her Year 10 written assessment tasks, yet, in her responses to what was happening when she read, she had very little to say. There were many *yes no* responses and when I pressed for more detail in trying to understand why *Deadly Unna* had stood out as a singular positive novel reading experience, she replied *I don't really know, um, it's hard to describe*. It was hard to sustain the energy on-line chatting requires when we talked about reading. In an effort to keep her on-side and interested, I interspersed our conversations with plenty of chat related to her other interests. The contrast in the length and exuberance of her responses not related to reading was striking.

It was precisely the perceived lack of action that made reading not worthwhile for Madison. *I think I could be doing something more constructive with my time*. This attitude extended to her lack of enjoyment of English in the classroom where she would like to have *more doing instead of sitting down just reading*.

The engaged readers' responses to questions on why reading was such a satisfying pursuit for them compared with students who didn't have the same reading experience sound quite judgmental. There were a variety of reasons offered but each suggested that it is the student not choosing to do what is required. Though less blaming, the American students in *You Gotta BE the Book* (Wilhelm, 1997) also identified this same dichotomy of action/inaction. (The title of this book, incidentally, comes from the explanation one of his students gave to another on the act of reading (p 49).

Put most succinctly by Patrick, when asked why he gained so much enjoyment and others didn't, he answered *cause I want to*. When I challenged him on this by asking about students who really find reading difficult, he was still inclined to apportion blame. *That's a pity because they haven't been taught very well or they must have decided to muck around in class all the time.*

Kimberley said that she felt *a lot of people are at a stage where no amount of rewards, encouragement or anything could make them want to understand*. As with Patrick, she felt her own experience was different because she wanted that understanding.

Some readers like myself become so emotionally involved in a book because I try to understand the characters' feelings. I want to be in their world. If you are just looking at words, like some people do, not listening to the characters, then you won't get any emotional attachment to the book.

Everyone could have that same enjoyment of the book. They just need to try and understand and imagine...it's not hard for them to try ...what can you lose?

Skye reported that she reads *because I like it and it helps me to be more in touch*.

Interestingly time management and social acceptance featured in a number of Brayden's responses to different questions. It was one of the factors he saw as contributing to other students' lack of reading.

I have one or two friends who are not readers...probably because of time management, they're always sky high in work or whatever...they don't manage their time very well. So they don't make time. I think it's also a fear of rejection from friends, like I mean, as I said, the "cool factor". 'If I read, what'll happen, will I still have the friends I have now?' ...that sort of thing.

Wilhelm reports on this same notion. One of his students explains that the reason they don't share their reading more publicly, is that they don't want to destroy their reputations. While Brayden identified the "cool factor" as a reason for others not reading,

none of the students in the case study group expressed their fear of being identified with reading research as a potential source of embarrassment. It is possible that the selection process ensured a group with a stronger sense of their own identity than would be the case with a typical group of 15-17 year olds. However, I know I was conscious as I proceeded with the research that such attitudes exist in the school, so I was always discreet in the arrangements I made with students, even when I knew students had spoken openly with their friends about participating in the research.

6.7.2 Level of engagement

One of the most exhilarating components of this research was having students describe what engaged reading was like for them. Perhaps this process was described most succinctly by Brayden, *bliss, absolute bliss*. The only time Patrick made a critical comment was in relation to having his class reading interrupted. *I start reading and then I just want to go on and on. I don't want to stop and answer questions.*

Kimberley described her intense engagement with a Year 8 set text *Channeary*.

I actually read a book in Year 8, Channeary and it was about refugees escaping their country. The deaths of the people were very graphic which got to me at the time. That kind of story makes you sick to the stomach.

Gary reported only two positive reading experiences of set texts, but he was one of the most avid readers of the ten students interviewed. During the year-long interview process, he always had *a book on the go* (sometimes under his classroom table).

What happens to me when I read a good book?...I switch off, the outside world is gone until I call it back. The words disappear and I 'see' what is in front of me as though it is happening. I am completely unaware of anything else unless something snaps me out of it.

I asked him to describe what it was like to be reading, the book, *Mostly Harmless*, (non-school reading) which he was reading at the time. *Endless laughing. He had me laughing out loud in the second paragraph.*

In conducting this research, findings that I had not anticipated at all emerged. One of these was the pleasure two of the students expressed in reading out loud to family members. In all my imaginings about students' reading practices, I had not envisaged these teenage boys reading out loud to their families; hence I had not framed any questions about this. In a discussion we were having on shared reading in class, Brayden told me,

Mum even encourages us to read out loud. Yeah. Yeah. She likes being read to. Sometimes I'll even read some of my set texts to her after I've finished with them, maybe the semester afterwards.

I asked him to describe it for me.

Well it's usually in our music room. We've got a big music room out the front. We've been doing up the house. So whenever we get the time, we sit down in this music room and it's fantastic at the moment. So we sit down and read. Each night we read. I read a novel to her.

I wondered if he thought of this as something special.

Yeah, cause we set aside time each night. It doesn't matter whether I'm doing homework or not, we'll just sit down and read.

Patrick's accounts of reading to his little brother became a recurring theme in our conversations.

I lie on my bed and read. I have to share a room with my brother (aged 9), so I read to him. I select books I think he will like, but sometimes I ask him...I'd read for as long as I could, sometimes a few hours. He insists that I do that. He doesn't want to miss out.

*I think last time [previous interview] I was reading **The Hobbit**. Now I'm reading **Lord of the Rings**. I think it's great. I love it. It's a lot more exciting the second time around. I love watching his reaction. It's like I get his enjoyment as well as mine.*

I wondered out loud what secondary set text reading would be like for this little brother who at the age of 8/9 had *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy read to him. Patrick hoped it would be good.

6.7.3 Other reading contexts

A clear finding that emerged from this research was that each of the five most engaged readers spoke spontaneously of their mothers as readers: Kimberley and Georgia's mothers regularly purchased books for them. Part of Patrick's mother's routine was the monthly trip to the library. Reading out loud to his mother had become part of Brayden's evening ritual and Gary spoke of his mother's reading tastes being quite dissimilar from his own. One wonders what the effect could be if each of the students who are less engaged could have such a mentor. What difference might it make to these students if someone enjoyed listening to them read, or was able to provide an ear for their student's views on books, or was willing to purchase books of the student's choosing or taste?

It is an interesting finding in that over recent years there has been a call for more obvious male mentors to motivate boys to read. This has resulted in promotion of popular figures such as footballers as readers. While this research in no way claims to be statistically significant, it does seem to indicate that for these students while having a mentor was significant, for the boys, having a male mentor was not.

A related finding was that for Kimberley and Brayden, books and book sharing amongst family members seemed to take on a heightened prominence during family vacations. Did this reinforce the notion of books as one of the ultimate pleasures?

Although Georgia and Gary were so critical of the set text process, each of them had their own reading friends, friends with whom they would share and recommend books. Cherland found in her research that as Georgia so clearly articulated, friends came before reading, but reading was an element of friendship groups.

What was also clear was that one became a member of a community by having read the same books, and that one remained active in that community by lending and borrowing books, by recommending books to each other, by looking for books for each other, and by talking about books together.

(Cherland, 1994, p. 100)

In the national research undertaken for the Australian Centre for Youth Literature, one of the challenges posed was to find other ways of allowing reading “to tap into some of the other needs dominating young people’s behaviour in order to truly become part of the fabric of their lives” (Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001, p. 16).

6.8 Re-reading and more reading

The re-reading of texts is an implicit assumption in the way set texts are taught. Students are often advised to read the book before the term starts and then again at the time of class study. Certainly, the need for reading texts on which VCE students will be examined is promoted to them as an important form of exam preparation. This was articulated to both parents and students at the school’s Year 12 Information night and promoted as a worthwhile homework activity at the Year 10 Information night. Yet teachers reported that they often struggle to get many of the students to read the book even once. One of the points of uneasiness which led to this research was my fear that not only did the study of set texts not increase students’ reading but that it might actually turn them against reading.

I did not find this was the case. Students’ broad reading positions seem to be established quite separately from the school reading experience. I questioned students on whether or not as a result of reading a text they were inclined to seek out similar texts, either by author or genre. Two of the students who had read *Tomorrow When the War Began* went on to read the series, though one of them expressed disappointment with later volumes.

Three of the students, Patrick, Hamish and Skye who read *The Hobbit* went on to read *Lord of the Rings*.

Gandalf the main character, I like him a lot. That's probably one of the reasons I went on to read Lord of the Rings. He was one of the main characters so I thought 'ah ha'. (Patrick)

Kimberley bought *Saving Francesca*, the second novel by Melina Marchetta as soon as it was released. After his delight in discovering Sonya Hartnett's *The Forest*, Brayden said that he would be on the look out for more books by Sonya Hartnett. Though this had been school reading, it was a free choice selection.

Georgia and Gary, the two students who described totally unsatisfactory set text reading in particular units, continued to read widely outside of school. Brayden who felt he had been put off fantasy for ever, was delighted to discover how much he enjoyed *The Forest* by Sonya Hartnett. Georgia who hated the genre of set texts in the "Strange and Mysterious" unit, continued to swap out-of-school book recommendations with her friends.

The students who either declared their non-interest in reading or were suggested to me because of their position at the lower end of the academic scale could see no point in re-reading when they already knew what would happen. This pattern is reflected in other research (Protherough, 1994). It seems that the more active readers, or "aesthetic readers" (Rosenblatt, 1969), active both in perception of the action of reading and those who read more books, gain from the act itself, whereas the efferent readers (Rosenblatt, 1969) see the act of reading as a path to information.

Gary on the other hand, who said *with all the set texts so far, none of them have made me look at them twice, I just read them and put them down* implies that one of the measures of a worthwhile book might be its capacity to draw him towards a second look. In terms of his non-school reading, he saw the value of re-reading. Kimberley's appreciation of books as learning sites to be revisited was reinforced by her comment that *reading's something you can look back on lots of times and every time you look at it there's something new.*

Martin was one student who did re-read a set text during the period of research. He had studied *Looking for Alibrandi* during Semester One of Year 10. In the last interview of 2002, when I asked him what he was going to read in the holidays, he said *I dunno yet...car manuals...things like that*. At the beginning of 2003, when I interviewed him, he told me he had re-read *Looking for Alibrandi* in the holidays. *I just read Looking for Alibrandi in the holidays. I saw the movie and I thought I might just read that again, so I read it*. Martin expressed real surprise at how different the re-reading was for him, *like how different it was, I had a look at that English essay I wrote last year, just how it's so different*. Having a student not only re-read the novel in the holidays, but then go back and re-read the essay he had written after his first reading, was another discovery I would never have anticipated prior to this research.

As was sometimes the case with other students, this was a point in the interview process which felt much more like a joint exploration of a concept than me trying to find out information from another person. Curiosity motivated Martin's re-reading and it seemed to also influence the way he thought about the experience of re-reading for himself. *You pay a bit more attention to the actual details rather than what the storyline's about. Yeah. You pay more attention to the details than what actually happens*. This deepened appreciation for detail when re-reading texts, was identified by the students in Wilhelm's research, giving substance to his argument for developing strategies for helping less engaged readers with the process of active imagining and for teachers to recognize the value of re-reading as separate reading experience from a first reading (Wilhelm, 1997).

Both Kimberley and Patrick saw re-reading as true pleasure. Kimberley said that she loved reading a book lots of times because *I can imagine it better...it's like I've been there before, It's a familiar place*. In an interview some months later, she told me that reading didn't fit into her busy life. She described though, how sometimes she would just open a book she's read before and start reading in the middle knowing that she doesn't have the time to read the whole book. Some weeks after that interview, when Kimberley was at home with the flu, she emailed me at school and asked me to send home a good book for her. It was Maureen McCarthy's *When you wake and find me gone*. She read it in 24 hours.

7 Set texts: Contributing to an emerging sense of identity?

7.1 Student well-being

This research has occurred at the time “middle years” has become one of the “buzz” words of educational discourse. Schools are being called on to respond to the perceived disenchantment and disengagement from school that seems to predominate at the Year 8 and 9 levels (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). One of the physiological explanations offered is that because the onset of puberty is occurring earlier, young people do not have the same latency period in which traditionally, they have developed a sense of their own identity (Carr-Gregg, 2001). At the same time, reports such as the “National Survey of Youth Mental Health and Well-Being” (Mental Health Council of Australia, 2000) and “Beyond Blue-the National Depression Initiative” (2004) raise major concerns about the numbers of young people at risk of self-harm and the “rise in frequency of depressive disorders among young people” (Goodman, 2002, p. 15).

Concurrently the concern about boys (Nieuwenhuisen, 2001) based principally on school measures of academic achievement and the perceived lack of role models has moved from being part of educational discussion to part of the political agenda (Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002).

The concept of identifying with a significant adult as one of the most effective protective features (Carr-Gregg, 2000; Carr-Gregg, 2001; Mind Matters, 2003) in dealing with youth suicide, has been promoted at recent ‘student well-being’ conferences. The potential role of teachers in providing that adult figure when some students have so few other options, has reinforced the notion that mental health issues and student well-being are part of what every teacher needs to attend to. Against this background of publicly articulated concern, the research sought to ascertain if students were in any way using aspects of set text study as contributors to their emerging sense of self.

7.2. Construction of identity

Identity construction is a field of study in its own right, so while in this thesis, I am seeking to evaluate the potential of set text study as a factor in students' concepts of their own identity, I do so cautiously. Identity construction is a complex business (Craib, 1998; Crossley, 2000; du Gay, Evans & Redman, 2000). In looking at the limitations of using the students' words as data in Chapter 5 (5.10.1), I identify the problem of believing that because one has the words, one has the meaning. But it is also important to recognise how students' versions of themselves are being given within a particular social and cultural framework.

The concept of identity is embraced and analysed within many disciplines. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the identified role that culture (Ben-Amos, 1999) and emerging technologies (Turkle, 1998, Chandler & Roberts-Young, 2003) play in identity construction. Crossley elaborates on the sociality of reporting concepts of identity, arguing for the perspective of contemporary developmental psychology in recognising how images of self are "mediated by the anticipated responses of significant and generalised others" (2000, p 13). This perspective may be even more important when the researched are adolescents and the researcher has a structured position of power within the school environment.

Particular discourses operate within educational and research settings and it is through these that the students' perspectives are mediated. The work of Ian Parker elaborates on this notion. He argues that visions of self are incorporated into dominant institutional and political structures (Crossley, 2000, p. 27). So in reading this data, it is important to understand the role that language with all its cultural and socio-political influences has played in foregrounding this particular information.

Relying on self reported concepts of identity is fraught with difficulties. Some of the attempts to counter these difficulties have led to the irony where a great deal of research regarding self and identity and "the study of human beings has become a totally 'lifeless' discipline" (Crossley, 2000, p. 4). By identifying the complexities of this data, but centralising it within this thesis, I am aiming to recognise the limitations in this mode of research but retain the rightful place of the student voice at the heart of educational research.

7.3 Set texts as agents of transformation

Some books enter my veins...my being. My sympathies have been deepened and expanded by literature.

(Susan Sontag, 2003)

Values are indeed the province of literature, but how they are finally understood depends very much on the way they are evoked and considered.

(Pradl, 1996, p. 75)

The literature review sets out a sample of positions held by educators and writers who see literature as having the capacity to effect some change of the individual. At a keynote speech at a national English teachers' conference, Margaret Scott called it developing an empathic response (2001). Teachers choose texts they hope will develop an empathic response from students, (Sarland, 1991; Sumara, 1996). Others encourage schools to choose books which offer an outcome of hope (Paterson, 1981; Brady, 1994; Randle, 2001).

In trying to find out whether any such change occurs, I questioned the students in terms of what they had learned and if they had changed as a result of reading the set texts. My interest is in any sort of change that might occur as a consequence of school set text reading.

One of the few areas in which there was a high level of agreement among the participants was the value these students placed on learning from books. Georgia was one of several students who identified the historical/cultural knowledge she had gained as one of the important aspects of set text study.

*I've learnt about some things that happened in different countries that I wouldn't have known without them. In **Strange Objects**, about the boat and the earlier European settlers. In **Channeary** I learnt about the Khmer Rouge and the wars that were happening in Cambodia and a little from **Hitler's Daughter**. I learnt a bit more about how Germans and Jewish people were treated during the war and what life was like in Germany.*

Even Chelsea, who claimed to not like reading set texts, when pushed said that the one aspect of *Parvana* which had interested her was the fact that the protagonist

was willing to dress like a guy to feed her family. Like if she was dressed like a girl then her family would have starved because as it said, you needed a man's permission to walk outside of your own home.

Hamish felt that the extent of this sort of learning was controlled by the readability of the book.

*It depends on what it says and the way it's set out. Like in **Strange Objects**, it kind of teaches you about the Aboriginal ways and all that, but I didn't think it was set out properly because it jumps back and forward too much and it just kind of loses you after a while. **Goodbye Vietnam** is a good read...um...and it seems to educate me and that on the war in Vietnam and what it was like for refugees...*

Martin felt that through *Looking for Alibrandi* he had learnt about good and bad experiences, how you can turn them into positives. Everything helps to shape you I think. Martin had no difficulty in correlating these experiences into his own life.

Yeah I know this can turn out all right. I've seen it in books... spose you have had a bad experienceit shapes you...you move on, you learn from it. I sorta realized that you can have a bad run and it can turn around and become part of you.

Kimberley identified both this sort of emotional growth as well as the political/cultural knowledge as being important. Although she had found some of the graphic and emotional incidents in the set texts disturbing, she was grateful for the learning that she felt she had gained.

I thought it was bad at the time, but I feel more educated and I understand more now. I was fairly ignorant when it came to issues like that before... I still am but not as much...

When I specifically asked Kimberley about learning from reading, she said that she thought *reading was one of the better ways of learning. With books you never stop learning*. Brayden also seemed to have a view that knowledge he gained from texts became part of his repertoire of responses to life's situations.

I take situations and put it into my own life. Like you have to think about it and you might change something about yourself.

*Like I mean, reading those sort of books, gradually you'd wind the thoughts around your own. Like in **Mahalia**, I can't remember if he's sixteen or seventeen, but he's had a baby and the girlfriend where I'm up to, she's just come back and she wants custody of the child. I think I tend to stereotype single parents, put them in one basket. I know I shouldn't, so it's a challenge to me to broaden my thinking.*

Similarly Brayden's responses to the questions on suicide representation showed this ready incorporation of the literary portrayal into his own life. He had initially said he didn't have much to say about suicide as it was so removed from his own experience, but in the final interview, commented on how he would use the knowledge gained from reading *Looking for Alibrandi* (see 7.3).

Gary who presented as such an avid reader was emphatic that he would not be changed by what he read. *No, I don't let outside influences...influence me really. I use what I learn and make decisions, but I don't let anything change me but me really.*

Skye's response reflected the most caution. Skye thought that books could change your ideas on something *if they were written in a way that manipulates the brain. Not many authors can manipulate someone's emotions. I don't think just anyone can.*

Martin was the student who seemed to read most deliberately for inspiration, who most consciously used his reading as part of plotting his pathway. In Year 9 Martin had been allowed a free choice selection. He chose to read Peter Brock's autobiography. *Sometimes I might just sit and rest and think, imagine if that was me! All through the book the message is, anyone can do it.*

I asked him if he believed that message.

Yep, if someone puts their mind to it. After it I thought, I just want to get out and do it. I've started to plan what I want to do, motor racing when I leave school. I've looked at "For Sale" signs.

I've thought about what I want to do, and how I want to do it, but it [reading] makes you think there are other ways. You read something and it'll change your mind. I look at paths he took and try and copy that...emulate his career. He's had hard times and he's come back from them. I've been determined to do it since I was younger. He's so determined. I can be like that.

7.4 Identification with characters

Through this research, I wanted to find out if the students identified with characters and relationships in the novels they studied in a way that would allow them to see these representations of people and relationships as possibilities for their own lives. A number of writers have wrestled with this concept of character identification. It is Sumara's (2002) belief that what manifests itself as an attachment to character is actually an attachment to the relationship (p.122). Misson (1998) who in arguing for an examination of the seductive process of literature (p.106-107) sees part of the process as "making us relate in particular ways to various characters" (p.116). This ultimately leads to his argument for students being critically aware of the way they are being positioned and to which characters' thoughts they are being given access. The students' responses which follow suggest that at times, some students are well aware of the positioning that has occurred, but others are very accepting of the presented textual detail.

As my interest centred on these teenagers' emerging sense of identity, I decided to examine the way these students viewed the adult characters they were required to study. In examining students' relationships to texts, I was seeking to understand whether or not they were identifying characters as people they would want to emulate and whether or not there might be a normalizing effect in seeing repeated characteristics in their readings of adult characters.

At the time I started my doctorate, a greater number of the set texts seemed to be “realistic adolescent” novels (Van der Hoeven, 2002). Two and a half years later, when I was actually gathering data, the vertical curriculum structure had been implemented at the school in which the research was undertaken. Often, this involved adapting existing units of work to the new structure, including the set texts. But in some cases, new units such as “Fun with Literature”, “The Fantasy Unit”, “Strange and Mysterious” were created with previously unused set texts. The effect of this was the incorporation of different genres of print texts into the curriculum, e.g. verse novels, more Shakespearean plays, and fantasy novels. This meant the questioning I had anticipated needed to broaden to incorporate the greater diversity of print texts.

A difficulty which seemed aligned to my preoccupation with cumulative text experience which was very clearly challenged by the students’ limited memory of texts, was a reluctance on the students’ part to distinguish characters as “adult”. They answered the questions more generally in terms of any characters they could recall. This was not important in that my concern was in trying to ascertain whether or not the characters in the set texts were presenting future possibilities for students. Perhaps of greater significance to the original question of cumulative experience was the difficulty some of the students had in remembering characters at all, but particularly those not being studied at the time.

Once again, level of engagement with the character seemed to be a key factor in students’ responses. It surprised me that Skye had trouble believing in the non-fictional character of Anne Frank, which of course eliminated any engagement or inspirational potential. *Sometimes I do [put myself in the shoes of a character], but not with Anne Frank. That story was hard to believe.*

Gary took a much more objective view than did any of the other interviewees. *I don’t hold hopes or get disappointed or anything for them. I just observe them.*

Both Brayden and Kimberley identified teenage characters as characters they had truly admired. Brayden, after struggling to recall both the character’s name and the book’s title,

identified Jesse Aarons from *Bridge to Terebithia* as a character whom he would “aspire to be like”.

Jessie Aarons. I think that's the name of the character. It's the main character anyway. Obviously the key event is the whole death scene towards the end...um...again the strength he shows after the death, the moving on. I like that strength in a character.

Kimberley identified emotionally with the teenage protagonist, Anna in *Peeling the Onion*, and identified this character as someone who affected her in an inspirational sense.

Pain is such an easy thing for me to relate to. She wasn't exactly a person who I could say was similar to me in experiences because I've never known something as hard as her experiences...pity was how I shared her experiences because I had no memories to relate her stories to.

Determination was also something that I felt I understood and related to. She was such a strong person who would probably be a role model.

Yeah definitely. That girl had guts...it would have been so hard to keep on every day, but that girl did it.

Yeah, I think it could [influence me]. Although she's a fictional character, she's someone who lived through what happened to her and if I was ever in the same position, I think she could influence me enough to keep going.

Martin recalled having trouble visualising a character from a Year 7 text, *Cannily, Cannily*. *I didn't like that sort of weird character. You couldn't get a picture of them, but with the autobiographical texts he mentioned, he had no difficulty at all.*

I sometimes felt Patrick was having a bit of fun with the research task at my expense. His response to questions on this issue was one such occasion. He told me he had no trouble in relating to fictional characters such as Bilbo, *I like eating. I can relate to that.*

With a lot of books I read, I can identify with the characters. I just imagine me in the role doing whatever they're doing. Say with Bottom, when he's being waited on hand and foot by the fairies, I imagine that's me. Who wouldn't?

In one of the additional comments Patrick added to his transcript at the end of the research period, Patrick added, *I actually see myself as a phantom, invisible to the characters but seeing exactly what's happening.*

But Patrick also seemed attracted by the idea of adventure, though it seemed to reinforce what he already believed rather than introduce a new idea to him. *They can be dangerous and scary but in the long run, they're really fun and exciting. I see myself in that situation.* Brayden too responded to the qualities which already resonated with him as worthwhile attributes. *One of the characters, it is the main character, Tian, [**The Forest**, Sonya Hartnett] I think, I can relate to it because it's got the whole leadership outlook and pressing on.*

Students struggled to identify a positive representation of an adult male. I was surprised that Hamish didn't readily suggest the teacher from **Pay it Forward**, as this set text and this character had seemed to matter to him when he was reading it in the previous year. He did say that the significant thing about this book for him was *just the thought that maybe one person could change the world and even...like with little steps, he was taking, it can make a big difference.* It was the mother character though who seemed to really capture his interest, though he clearly didn't approve of the way she viewed herself.

Some of them kind of... um...like...there's...a bit where it's talking about where his Mum doesn't really like...there's a bit where his Mum...he's trying to get his teacher to go with his Mum. His Mum seems to really put herself down a lot. Um...it kind of makes me take pity on them cause they're very pitiful towards themselves.

When I asked him what he thought about this and why, he said,

It makes me think I wouldn't do that to myself. It's just... um...the type of thing that you don't really need to be telling yourself. If you can't live with yourself, then...who can live with you?

Both mother characters in *Looking for Alibrandi* and *Jinx* were identified by students as *strong*. Georgia said that she thought Jen's Mum [in *Jinx*] was,

a fairly good portrayal, she seemed real. Her husband left her when he found out that she was having a disabled child, so she would have to be emotionally very strong not to show a lot of resentment to Grace (their daughter) about that.

As I heard the students speaking about both these women and the men who had abandoned them, I wondered if in fact, these were examples of the re-enforced stereotypes such as the long-suffering single mothers abandoned by hopeless men, that I was already feeling uneasy about. I was conscious too that *Deadly Unna*, another Year 10 text presented another version of a similar stereotype. Scutter devoted a chapter of her book, *Displaced Fictions* to the construction of "motherhood" in contemporary adolescent novels (1999). She explored the concept of the absent mother, the indulgent mother the dead mother "hovering like a blessing", and the inept mother, and concluded, "We should, I think, recognize the reactionary and nostalgic nature of this fiction for what it is, a narrative rear guard action impelling women back to a notional and familial bliss that never was" (Scutter, 1999, p.222).

When I asked Gary about the way he felt adult males were portrayed in the set texts, he responded:

They often seem foolish or irrational. Sometimes, just plain stupid. Most appeared to be played down rather effectively. ...It might be a concern...perhaps the feminist movement was a good idea, but might be tipping the balance.... I think it would be a concern, but most readers I don't think will notice, nor too many teachers unless they are passionate about English.

I found his response interesting in the sense that his theorising seemed to be articulating one of the emerging findings; that my concerns were not being substantiated precisely

because of the general lack of engagement or interest and Gary didn't see this lack as a student prerogative. His perception of adult male representation provided an interesting parallel with the work of Vivien Maloney (2003). In examining "the representation of father figures in contemporary Australian women's short fiction, Maloney found examples of father figures who were "weak and foolish, "absent" or "abusive". In each case she found them to be "disruptive agents in the lives of mothers and daughters". As does Gary, she purports that these representations are a reflection of the cultural shift of feminism (p.57-64).

In an article entitled, "Interrogating Texts, Racist Discourses" Ann Carmichael (2001) talks of a powerful lesson she learned when she introduced her indigenous Australian students to a short story by Oodgeroo Noonunical. Choosing it for notions of "worthiness" and "relevance", she found that indeed the experiences described were the experiences of many of her students and their families. What surprised her was the acceptance of one student in particular of the treatment of a Torres Strait Islander as inferior because he had accepted that belief about himself. She felt that the students were eventually able to deconstruct texts in a way that allowed them to see how dominant discourses had affected their thinking. She attributed this successful outcome to the skill and background of her co-teacher who was himself an Indigenous Australian, so had been able to work from a perspective of shared history. He had the knowledge to provide different versions of Australia's history and to have them see whose interests were being served by the varying constructed "realities".

I report this account because while the treatment of texts within the classroom is not the dominant focus of this paper, it is clearly fundamental to what is taken from a text by a particular student. While many teachers might accept the ideal of providing Aboriginal literature to students, to develop the knowledge base to provide a range of such literature on which they are well informed would take a considerable commitment. An Aboriginal text might be one of several texts with which we have to make this sort of commitment to do it and the students, justice. Not all teachers are willing or able to do this. Gribble recently reported on the perceived struggle some teachers are having in managing to teach the syllabus from a critical literacy perspective (Yaman, 2004). There would be many teachers who do not understand or do not have the skills to deconstruct a text in the manner advocated by Carmichael.

Carmichael reports that “texts work linguistically, semiotically and politically in various contexts” (2001, p. 125). It is a position which most teachers who have paid heed to current theories of literary discourse would accept. She argues that the kind of teaching needed requires “sensitivity and respect and the juxtaposing of many texts over time, with students practising the meta-language to talk about the texts they dismantle”(2001, p.125). The curriculum demands she makes, as is the case with most curriculum initiatives are time-consuming. Time is not something most classroom teachers feel they have. But it is true, if students are creating their own juxtaposition of many texts over time, and being supported in their acquisition of critical literacy skills, they will be in a better position to evaluate the various “realities” with which they are presented.

Kimberley’s comments show that she is really thinking at a contextual level about the adult characterization of the novels in terms of the publishing industry and marketing strategies.

The older people are really like parents...and I guess authors are trying to get into teenagers’ heads a bit, and don’t really include much of the parents...or if they are included, then they are not really portrayed as good people...more like annoying old people.

While there was no evidence to suggest that the sort of critical literacy teaching about the book industry as suggested by Scutter, (1999, p. 302-306) and towards texts in general as advocated by Lankshear & McLaren (1993), Misson (1998) and Robinson & Robinson (2003) had been experienced by any of the students in this research, Kimberley’s comments suggest a personal level of critical awareness.

7.5 Literary representations of suicide

Reading gives us a whole range of different intellectual and emotional positions that we might inhabit: it extends our repertoire of ways that we might live, react, see things.

(Misson, 2003)

I began my thesis with a very broad question: Do the students identify with situations in the novels they study in a way that would allow them to see these events as possibilities for their own lives? As I became more realistic about the scope of this thesis, I chose to focus on one situation only, examining the response of these students to the representation of suicide in the set texts that they were required to study.

At the beginning of my research period, the issue of suicide representation was one of many features I wondered about. Moving into the welfare/administrative role of House-leader, and therefore being directly responsible for the management of a quarter of the school's students, moved that interest to a principal concern. Hence, the reason for my choice in terms of which situation I chose to question the students about.

I wanted to know if there were grounds for the fear that a process of "normalization" might be occurring with repeated representations of some features of set texts. One of the difficulties in undertaking research which focuses on the text in this way, is working with the tension which exists between a post-modern view which challenges the concept of the power of the text and the drive to question all school practices (including text choices and classroom practices), in the light of the increasing number of students who suicide.

One of my early discoveries in looking at the contextual features surrounding set text study at this school was an existing possible sequence of set texts, each of them featuring a suicide. At a suicide prevention seminar held in 2000, at a local university, Michael Carr-Gregg drew attention to similar lists existing in other schools and posed a question about the wisdom of presenting re-enforced messages through set texts.

Table 3 Existing sequence⁶ of set texts featuring representations of suicide:

Research site: 2002

Year Level	Title of Set Text
Year 9	Jinx
Year 10	Looking for Alibrandi Romeo and Juliet Dead Poets' Society (film text)
Year 11	Montana The Things They Carried

Because of the vertical curriculum, there is not a direct pathway which all students follow, however, students could have chosen a sequence of units, or been placed in units, which meant they were studying these texts sequentially. I wanted to know whether or not such a sequence mattered. What meaning-making was going on for these students who were reading these books? Would there be any indication of a normalizing process occurring? Was it disturbing, or a non-event on their consciousness? Could it be presenting possibilities for any students, but especially for the students most at risk of self-harm?

In considering the experience of set text study, one needs to attend to the meaning-making resulting from the associated class task. In a Wizard text guide (a popular curriculum guide) on "The Gathering", the discussion on the theme, "suicide" is accompanied by suggested tasks. Part of the first one reads, "With a partner carefully construct a plausible explanation as to why in three attempts at suicide Anna failed in each case, and what, if anything, this might indicate about her, her life and the past she had known" (Fusillo, 1998, p.38). Such an activity is demanding of students a close examination of the process of attempted suicide. It might be perceived as just another time filler and not even cause a ripple in a student's consciousness. It might lead students to ponder the ineffective

⁶ Although the possibility of studying the five texts listed above existed, no student in the research group had followed that sequence. At the beginning of the research period, most students had not studied a book with any representation of suicide. By the end of the research period, several students had encountered two or three literary representations of suicide in their set text study.

methods Anna used. It might lead students to offer alternatives to move on “from the past she has known.” A student’s individual reading cannot be predicted, but it is occurring at a time of unprecedented youth suicide. What is known is that if the student does undertake this task, it will require a close examination of the process of attempted suicide.

In contrast to these explicit tasks provided for students, is the perception expressed by some teachers that as they deliberately avoid dealing with suicides in the texts, it is not an issue. One of the key messages from this thesis would be the reminder of how the physical text is one part of a students’ reading experience. The research reported on two students who were in the same class studying the same text, doing the same tasks with the same teacher, but whose reported experiences were so different. Knowing how other experiences impact on a student’s reading is not measurable. Recognising that they do is fundamental to understanding the act of reading (Scholes, 1989) and acting in the best interests of the students.

The questioning on set texts featuring representations of suicides revealed that for some students the personal effect on them as a reader was very much tied up with their level of engagement. When I talked to Georgia about her response to Charlie’s suicide in *Jinx*, she felt the superficial character portrayal, as well as her own lack of experience, ensured a minimal emotional response. *He didn’t really have a strong enough character for me to care [when he died] and I haven’t known anyone in this situation, so I had nothing to associate him with.*

Brayden was fairly dismissive of the John Barton character in *Looking for Alibrandi*. But for Brayden, it was the contrived plot which lessened the impact.

It was pretty predictable. You know how he said, “life’s a shit”. It was pretty obvious, so it wasn’t a major shock. I’ve never really experienced someone so depressed. He was one of those characters I didn’t understand.

In contrast, Kimberley had a very strong emotional response to John Barton’s suicide, but she saw value in having read the books that disturbed her the most.

When John died, I was ready to cry. I was actually hiding behind my book. I felt like I knew him and I was losing a friend.

*When I read **Looking for Alibrandi** in class, I was forced to look at different aspects that I had never thought of before and that definitely changed me.*

In contrast to her response to reading graphic images which made her *sick to the stomach* (p 6.2), Kimberley felt reading *other stories like ones with suicide more get to your head, but I think you mature after reading them*. It is an interesting distinction that Kimberley makes. Her distinction also reinforces the notion of the action involved in reading and the concept of embodiment (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000, p.66).

Brayden was the only student who identified a clear positive value in his experience of literary suicide. While emphasizing his own lack of direct experience of suicide, he saw the knowledge he had gained from reading about John Barton's suicide as useful information.

Brayden: *I know for me from reading **Looking for Alibrandi**... well I haven't actually been affected by suicide directly, but I think now for me after reading **Looking for Alibrandi**, if someone was becoming depressed in my circle of friends, I'd be more likely to pick up the depression factor, whereas before I was oblivious I suppose. I wasn't aware. But now, I'm a bit more informed.*

Anne: *So what would you do differently?*

Brayden: *Well in the first place, I wouldn't have even known there was a problem, but now I could recognize that there is a problem there.*

Anne: *Are you saying because you read the book you might recognize the symptoms of depression?*

Brayden: *Yeah, I'm more informed now.*

Anne: *And would you do things differently because of this knowledge?*

Brayden: *I might just talk about it, bring it out in the open... sort of thing. I don't think solving the problem is going to be ... (office phone rings)*

This particular instance challenges one of McKenzie's (2002) concerns. McKenzie expressed the fear that representations might be reinforcing notions about suicide that could add to the problem. Whereas Brayden's response demonstrated that there might be benefits to be gained from a literary experience of suicide. The fundamental question is whether or not students do embrace or reject notions presented to them through set texts.

Gary who, when questioned on whether or not he might be influenced by what he read, was adamant that he himself wouldn't be (see 7.1), but thought that there was a possibility that another student reader could be influenced by a fictional suicide. *I think it is possible, but not a rule. But definitely an influence in some way.* Gary's disparaging dismissal of Romeo and Juliet as two irrational characters, and his view of John Barton as contrived, suggest that for Gary, the emotional impact of these deaths was minimized by the lack of perceived credibility of the particular characters. Gary was the only student whose response reflected a critical view of the text by examining the nature of the representation. *I think it depends how it is portrayed. Whether it is portrayed as an easy solution or a noble cause or such a waste.*

With this exception, there is no evidence from the students' responses to suggest that these students believed they or others could be influenced towards an act of suicide by the fictional representations they had encountered in set texts.

During this period of research, I did learn from my own reaction following the suicidal death of one of our students. We were studying *Romeo and Juliet* at the time of this boy's death. The students had performed various scenes. We would normally have gone on to act the last scene, to talk about the tragedy, to debate individual choice and parental pressure. But I had no energy for this. As light-hearted as the acting had been, I couldn't ask the students to re-enact Act V. Many of us were struggling to perform the most routine tasks. I told the students we would leave *Romeo and Juliet* for a while. We had enough sadness of our own.

Another telling event occurred at the beginning of the research period. Again, in my work as House-leader, a student (not involved in the research) disclosed a situation of sexual abuse within his family. Next time we spoke, I asked him what class he was heading to. It was English. He told me they were “doing *Montana*”⁷. I looked at him and asked what it was like for him. “It’s awful. I try and keep it separate in my head, but I can’t, that’s not how I read books”.

These two experiences helped shift my thinking from being pre-occupied with a possible link between reading and acts of self-harm or suicide to considering students’ sense of well-being. Through my work in schools, I have listened to a number of stories from students that have rocked my understanding of the way human beings operate. I can hardly believe how some of these students manage their daily routines given the sadness and trauma with which they are living. As a teacher at the time of that student’s death, I was in a position to say, we’ll leave this set text aside for now. But these students don’t have that power. No matter what else is going on in their lives, they are asked to probe and delve and think about and write about the set text, whatever its associations for them. Such revelations reinforced for me the value of Appleman’s stance in being responsive to the amount of “stuff” (see 4.5.2) going on in students’ non-school lives.

Although the literary representations of suicide in the studied set texts appeared to be perceived so innocuously by the few students who were able to comment, research by others suggests that there is a direct link between exposure to media stories on suicides and the rate of suicides (Phillips & Carstenson, 1986). Such a claim of the potential impact of exposure is significant. This empirical evidence suggested that it was not statistically significant whether or not the stories were general stories about the issues of suicide or specific news stories about a particular person’s suicide, though the former was slightly higher. Such reports ought to raise questions for schools, English faculty administrators and teachers about text selection and text based classroom practices.

We do not know if a representation replicates what a student already knows from their own life situation and might therefore be absorbed without question, or how a new and

⁷ In this novel, one of the key characters, a doctor and uncle of the young narrator, is found to have been systematically abusing the girls and women he was treating at the nearby Indian reservation. While he awaits trial, he kills himself in the basement of the narrator’s house.

unmediated representation will be read by different readers. We do know what value advertisers place on the capacity of individuals to respond to subliminal images. The general lack of resistance towards stereotypical characters (see 7.3) supports the call for specific teaching of critical literacy practice. Bill Corcoran has argued that our “overall mandate...is to ensure that students leave each level of schooling with a developed and reflective sense of their own reading strategies, with a range of insights into how texts work, and with an array of strategies for resisting, contesting, and re-writing texts” (1994, p.23).

Helping students develop critical practices to enable a closer textual reading is a worthwhile teaching goal. It has the potential to place students in a more powerful position to evaluate how they are being positioned in relation to characters or situations or other features of a text. However, other teaching goals are not achieved universally. The students’ responses in this study sometimes indicated very superficial and sometimes non-completed reading of the set texts. To see critical literacy as a solution to the most serious concerns raised in this thesis is a simplification. A student who is severely depressed may not even be relating to the people who are closest to him/her. It is unlikely that they will be in a position to start adopting or implementing critical reading practices.

The call for consciously raising critical awareness when it comes to the noted issues could also have a detrimental effect in the sense of “overkill”. Given that a student’s reading of a text is an evolving and multi-faceted experience, what impact might it have for the students if each teacher encountering a literary suicide feels obliged to focus on the issue and ensure that all students are employing close reading strategies? How might this talk, these tasks, this emphasis affect the student’s reading? It is possible that for some students in this school, this would be happening in five sequential units. Apart from the concern of normalising behaviour by repeated emphasis and examination of representations (Philips and Carstenson, 1986), what might this teacher response do to the boredom factor? Adding suicide to the list of representations deserving of critique does not solve the problem. Given the ideological questioning that has occurred in relation to racial and gender positioning in texts, teacher consciousness of these areas has been heightened. Such consciousness raising may well lead to overt critical literacy practices being applied to obvious ideologies but not being applied to more subtle or insidious textual positioning.

My position is supported by other research. Oliver and Lalik (2001) argue for helping students to learn critical practices so that they are able to resist dominant cultural narratives pertaining to body image encountered in curriculum materials. But they argue that this is not enough. Students ought to be able to experience their bodies and minds as “a cherished and inseparable dimension of being through the curriculum materials” (p. 330). Similarly I am arguing for students being supported to develop the skills to critically evaluate how they are being textually positioned but I am concerned if students are always needing to take resistant positions. Perhaps our students too could benefit by discovering that “we read to know that we are not alone.”

The prevalence of suicides by students in school demands that we continue to examine school practices with a view to minimizing potential contributing factors. The students’ responses suggest that limited engagement limited their reactions to the presented literary suicides. However, if both writers and teachers succeeded in gaining the level of imaginative engagement aimed for, perhaps the students’ readings of these literary representations would be different. While I could not claim any link from the responses of the students in this study between the literary representations of suicide and their own potential behaviour, I did become aware of the distress that particular literary representations caused students. In the light of this, I find the conclusion of the suicidologist, Shneidman a compelling argument for attending to the balance of textual material presented in secondary school classrooms. In reflecting on the most important work on suicide that had been done during the 20th century, he concluded “I believe that the rule for saving a life in balance can, amazingly enough, be rather simply put: reduce the inner pain” (2001, p.201).

7.6 Overview

In trying to ascertain whether or not literary representations were likely to contribute to a student’s emerging sense of identity, I questioned all students about this form of literary representation. In reality, I was only able to make a very limited evaluation of this feature of set text study. The four students who had encountered literary suicide did not report

anything that made me think this process was happening for them. Only one student was able to comment on representations in successive set text study.

Some of the students did express attitudes of attachment, admiration, grief, and inspiration suggesting high levels of engagement with these literary characters. With the exception of Kimberley, none of the students reported any emotional engagement with any of the characters who suicided. The intensity of engagement with other characters though was an important component of reading pleasure for a number of the students. Other aspects of the study highlighted the complexity of individual reading experiences.

Most of the students reported characteristics of characters uncritically, The exceptions were Kimberley who thought that it was a wise marketing move to position adult characters negatively and Gary who thought that a student's reading of a literary suicide would depend on how it was portrayed. The more general, unquestioning acceptance of textual features encountered and spoken about, adds weight to the call for helping students to develop critically literate practices.

The students varying responses to specific texts point to the highly individualistic nature of the act of reading. This thesis has reported on work that has explored both the private and public components of that act of reading and related these to set text study. As my consciousness was raised during the process of this research to the trauma of some students' non-school lives and my knowledge of individual reading experiences increased, I came to the point where it seemed unnecessarily callous to demand of some students the close reading of some texts that set text study in its present form requires. I would add my voice to those calling for caution in the setting of particular texts and text-based activities, particularly the public activities of set text reading.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Overview of the research

I set out to investigate what meaning-making was occurring for this small group of students through their study of set texts in the English curriculum. I began by locating the research questions within the context of my own teaching. I then established where these questions fitted with the existing literature, both as a response to the obvious need for research in this area of student experience and as a contextual positioning. I have given a brief overview of the way cultural, historic, economic and political beliefs have impacted on and contributed to the construction of this dimension of school practice. In presenting the literature review, I provided a brief overview of the development of recent literary theory in order to show some of the ways different perspectives have also contributed to the present construct of set text study.

In explaining why I went about the research in the way I did, I sought to show how my theoretical position on how knowledge is constructed and communicated, informed my methodological procedures. My research design acknowledged the Leavisite and reader-response theories of reading that were inherent in my own education and teacher training, and I have argued, still exert a major influence in schools. At the same time, the theoretical and critical dimensions of post-structuralism have affected attitudes and reading practices in English classrooms. Issues of textuality, multiple readings, and literary and personal power are characteristics of this. These characteristics are an intrinsic component of the specific research design of this study.

The methodology I adopted evolved from more recent ways of thinking about the act of reading, including broad theoretical positions and the experience of other contemporary researchers of set text study. The act of research, especially the use of on-line chat and the thirteen-month time frame, presented new challenges to my evolving ideas on language and knowledge. In reporting the findings of this research, I endeavoured to foreground the students' experience of the set text study process, while recognizing the dominant position I held, not just as researcher, interpreter and reporter, but also because of the position I

held within the school. In reviewing the chosen methodology, I feel satisfied that given the context in which I was researching, the design provided a structure which allowed me to engage with students in a way that facilitated the level of reflection from students that I required.

In explaining, my choice of students, I clarified that while I sought a cross-section of students, I was not at any point imagining that the sample of students was representative. I did feel however that important things could be learnt by in-depth research with a relatively small number of students and this has clearly been the case. There was very little complete agreement from these student participants on any of the issues raised. While this poses some difficulties in trying to draw findings together, the uniqueness of each student's experience highlights again the importance of in-depth student focussed examination of school practices.

I am concluding this thesis by evaluating the findings in response to the original research questions. From these findings, particularly where they correlate with the findings of other researchers, I am presenting my key recommendations.

This thesis emanated from my own dissatisfaction with part of my teaching. It will end with a reflection of what I have learnt through this process of learning about students' learning and the implications of that for my own teaching. This may be useful for other teachers seeking to establish better learning environments for their students in their English classes, or it may encourage other teachers to closely examine what is happening for their students in their classrooms.

8.2 The student experience of set text study

I have explained how in formulating the research questions (see 1.2), I chose to use a broad question, "What is the experience of set text study like for students?" to accommodate new and unexpected data that might arise during the research process. At the same time, I chose five guiding questions to specifically address the questions I was asking about set text study. These questions (which follow) have guided the research and provided an underlying structure to this research.

8.2.1 The students' reading practices

Where does set text study/ reading fit in the student's world of reading, especially in terms of other reading practices, digital, electronic and non-school print reading?

One of the early surprises for me was the discovery that for six of these students, reading as a recreational activity was preferred to computers, television or film viewing. While details varied, the readiness of teenagers to embrace reading as a leisure activity was confirmed in the two recent Australian studies on teenage reading practices referred to throughout this thesis. (Australian Council for Youth Literature, 2001; Manuel & Robinson, 2002). The same studies refer to the way the social needs of teenagers are reflected in their recreational pursuits. This was particularly evident in the girls' responses, although both boys and girls in the study described book sharing as part of particular friendships rather than all friendships. Only one student conformed to what might be the stereotypical view of teenage 'obsession with computers' and one student did not own a computer. However this question showed the value of a longitudinal study in that even within this time frame, patterns of recreation altered so much (see 6.3 & 6.4).

8.2.2 Student learning

Do students perceive set text study as providing worthwhile learning opportunities?

It interests me that none of these students expressed what could be called "laziness" or an unwillingness to work. Their expressions of dissatisfaction were in response to: being bored, feeling that the lessons were geared to lower achievers, repetitive tasks, non-engagement with the particular texts, unsatisfactory class discussions, feeling that their views were not valued, and in one case, being tested a long time after the reading of the book. The points of greatest satisfaction, which students articulated seemed to be linked to tasks which allowed them to express either their creativity or their individuality, and having teachers model what was required in tasks. A number of students identified learning from the reading of the set texts; some in terms of learning about other places and people, some as personal insights, some from a more practical orientation. For Patrick, Kimberley and Brayden the school reading experience included these aspects but extended to intense personal engagement.

But for most of the students, the classroom was a long way from the ideal of a shared reading space. Boredom with the texts and the tasks, and the behaviour of peers, as well as dislike for the selected text, seemed to be the most serious detractors. The reported advantages of the learning tasks undertaken seemed to be minimal compared with the investment of several lessons for five or six weeks. Several of the students were able to reflect on the cumulative experience positively, though the memories of most of the students of set text study of earlier years were vague.

The generic text response featured often in students' reports of learning tasks and was regarded as a time-filler, both by its nature and the frequency with which it was set. In contrast, students seemed to enjoy the occasional activities, which required critical literacy processes, artistic expression or provided the opportunity to articulate their personal views. Students expressed dissatisfaction with the tasks that required them to submit information about the books rather than allowing them to participate more creatively.

The process of interviewing students allowed me to work with students in an ideal environment. As a doctoral student, I had made the commitment to work with these students in this way. It was time consuming, both in the scheduling and getting to interviews, in participating in the interviews themselves, in the recording of transcripts and following through with students at the end of the data collection period. No teacher could possibly work with each of his or her students as intensively as this. Yet there seemed to be some fundamental lessons for me in my teaching. Most of the students obviously enjoyed the process. This was evident in the easy relationships, the generous contributions, the interviews that were initiated by students and the willingness of two of the students to keep the interview process going beyond the research period with informal on-line chatting. What they articulated as being of value to them was having their views heard. My motivation was not altruistic, but it emerged that they found it very satisfying to have someone so interested in what they thought about the way they learnt through books.

8.2.3 Enjoyment and extension

Are the students gaining enjoyment from their set text study and does it lead to more reading?

Patrick was *the* only student who was not critical of at least some units or major components of set text study. The students' criticisms suggest that despite the practice within postmodernism to view texts as only a partial contributor to the reading experience, it was particular selected texts that the students often identified as the cause of their disengagement. There were two additional book-related dimensions to the exasperation expressed by students. One was the continual frustration of being presented with books and teaching practices perceived as geared to a lower level. The other was the alienation felt when students didn't relate to the chosen genre and then had to endure a term (or in the case of Georgia, two terms of work) on a text which had no interest for them or worse, a text and consequent teaching practices to which they could not relate at all with the result for at least one student, that the reading experience became a humiliating and off putting experience.

Madison could only identify one book she had ever liked and that was a set text, *Deadly Unna*, Gary and Hamish had liked two texts but for Kimberley and Lance, the books they didn't like were the exceptions and Patrick loved every book he'd read at school. As outlined in the findings, there were a few examples of students following on with an author or genre, but in general, this was not something the students reported as happening. In different units, some students reported negative attitudes towards going to English. The manifestation of this varied from internal dread to planning alternative disruptive activities in the ensuing class.

When students spoke of their positive reading experiences they alluded to much more than the text. Patrick in particular, gained immense enjoyment from aspects of shared reading such as noting other people's reactions and wanting other people to enjoy what he had read. Throughout the study, he reported positively on his teachers' involvement, on his own interest in each unit, on the texts he was studying, the tasks he was required to do and significantly on the interest in sharing his enjoyment of reading with others in the class. He likened it to a team sport, high praise from a keen basketball player.

8.2.4 Ideology and identity

Do the students identify with adult characters in a way that would allow them to incorporate aspects of these representations into their emerging identity?

Although some of the students reported a high level of emotional engagement with characters in the books and clearly felt for the characters, in general they did not seem to identify with adult characters in a way that indicated they would choose particular paths because of their reading. Martin was the obvious exception. He deliberately read for inspiration, reading with a view to choosing pathways, following in the footsteps of others.

However the concern which led to these research questions pertaining to the literary characters and situations was heightened for me by the students' apparent unquestioning acceptance of what seemed to me to be stereotypical representations of adult characters. In the discussion on literary representation of suicide, I drew attention to the potential sequence of texts with suicide representations, wondering about the effect of repeated representations. The students' responses to my questions on the representations of adult characters, particularly their uncritical acceptance of self-sacrificing mothers alerted me to another sequence of existing Year 9-10 texts: *Jinx*, *Deadly Unna*, *Looking for Alibrandi*.

Despite calls for empowering students through adopting critical literacy practices, the students' reports did not suggest that this was happening very widely. If the students are not developing skills which enable them to see how they as readers are being positioned, or which encourage them to question the literary representations being offered, then the concerns which motivated this section of the research are well founded.

8.2.5 Literary representations

Do the students identify with situational representations of suicide in the set texts they study, in a way that would allow them to see these events as possibilities for their own lives?

I did not find that in this research with these students at this time, there was evidence to suggest a link between the situations about which they were reading and studying and the

likelihood of their acting out these situations. The students themselves attributed their lack of engagement with the scenarios or the characters, to the inadequacy of the literary representations. These students did not see reading literary suicides as problematic because they had not been drawn into any of the scenarios. If we are more successful with the goal of helping students to actively engage with the texts they read, we might have greater reason to be concerned about particular or repeated literary representations of suicide or attempted suicide.

8.3 *The business of words*

Simmering under this thesis has been a subtext of “words”. I began by reflecting on how the words to which I’d been given access through set text study have continued to be such a vital part of my life. I pondered what different textual representations might mean to the students in this study. I recorded what others have said about what different textual arrangements of words have meant to them. I have considered the questions of others also concerned about patterns of domination and suppression in the arrangements of words on the page.

In operating from the theoretical position of constructivism, I accepted the limitations of words as recording only the moment of public articulation of much more thinking. The ideas recorded in this thesis, both the students and my own have been borne out of this act of research. The given words are not from a pre-existing reality, but from my attempts to put language around this exploration of the students’ experience of set text study. Using an on-line chat facility allowed us to create a different sort of text, an interactive print text. In reflecting on the students’ reported experience of set text study, I am thinking that both their greatest satisfactions and dissatisfactions were to do with their relationship with words. Although I had thought of this research as a study of students’ reading, one of its most powerful lessons for me has been to rethink my expectations of students’ writing in relation to text.

A cursory glance through back copies of *English in Australia*, will show how much more thinking, we as a profession, have done in regard to other people’s texts in comparison with how little thinking we have done about the students’ own texts. For all our thinking

about the value of incorporating multi-modal texts or texts to which different groups of students will have social or cultural access, we have not really considered other possibilities for students' written texts. Too often we have adapted newer technologies to traditional ways of thinking and learning. Although on-line chat and hypertext modes have been accessible for some years, linear individually written tasks continue to dominate school curriculum and assessment. Examining and thinking about potential forms of student texts is well beyond the scope of this research, but it emerges very clearly as an area for further research.

Similarly although this thesis has acknowledged the role of the aesthetic as instrumental in presenting ideology through texts, there has not been scope to question students' responses to the particular arrangements of words in the text. Nor has there been scope to attend to an examination of the way some arrangements of words and particular linguistic features are privileged or suppressed in the school context. This too is being recommended as an area for further research. I would also argue that a profession which so many claim to have joined because of their love of words, ought to attend to the work of evaluating the language it uses and the language its structures support.

8.4 Recommendations for the teaching profession

It seems to me the biggest challenge needs to be a shift from the en masse approach to set text study, not just in terms of the text itself but also what is required of students. One of the clearest findings emerging from this research and aligned with the findings of other researchers (Wilhelm, 1997; Brennan, 2001; Ryan, 2001; Manuel & Robinson, 2002, Kettel & Douglas, 2003) is the challenge to the established practice of using a single text for all class members regardless of reading engagement levels, individual experience, reading preferences or any other differences. Manuel and Robinson's work highlights possible alternatives, including "group novels, negotiated whole group and individual reading contracts, reading logs, reading pairs and parallel reading programs" (2002, p.77). Ryan (2001) suggests using shorter texts to meet specific learning goals, so that students are not always having to work their way through novels. She reports on the use of mini-sets (p. 107) and suggests replacing some novels with shorter texts, particularly poetry when it comes to the goal of increasing sensitivity to language (p.109). Pradl's (1996)

argument for using shorter texts is based on his belief in the value of shared exploratory reading. So although he accepts teachers may want to be well prepared in teaching a novel text, the use of multiple shorter texts will allow the class group to undertake shared first readings. Kettel & Douglas (2003) argue for a multi-text single theme teaching approach so that all students can engage with the processes but can choose books according to their diverse reading abilities.

An attitudinal shift is needed to change the perception of the studying and reading of set texts (whatever form this takes) to recognition that these are creative endeavours. Three factors emerged as limitations which mitigated against classroom practices which support the reading and studying of texts as creative acts. The “trickle down” effect in junior classes of the VCE course and assessment requirements could be seen in the repeated text response tasks of which the students spoke so disparagingly. Clearly teachers feel obliged to have students skilled in the areas of VCE assessment, but this research suggests that some types of class tasks are being repeated in almost every unit while other skills or learning opportunities hardly receive any attention.

The second limitation is that it seems that there is an expectation that the set text is the vehicle for the transmission of most of the skills taught in English, hence the 5-8 week units on a particular text. If school faculties are clear in their teaching and learning goals for their particular school populations, then it will allow them to provide both for the academic requirements currently in place and for the learning opportunities that they believe ought to exist and these students’ responses indicate should exist. This will clarify when using texts is useful in achieving particular goals. But it will also provide the time for texts to be enjoyed and indeed learnt from, without the expectation that particular activities and assessment tasks need to accompany the reading. One of the determining factors in text selection seemed to be establishing its potential for follow-on activities. If this emphasis moved closer to a premise of shared reading, rather than what can be done with a particular book, the result might be greater engagement for students such as Gary and Georgia who were so disengaged from school reading but for whom shared reading was part of a dynamic out of school life.

The third more fundamental limitation seemed to stem from a more traditional view of text. Tasks such as comprehension reinforce the notion of text as a fixed entity with an

inherent truth to be discovered. Perhaps of greater concern is that such a view of text reinforces the notion of reading as an act of decoding rather than a creative act of being. The better readers who verbalized the action of reading literally by using active verbs to describe the reading process reinforce the notion of “being in the books” as integral to the greater level of engagement enjoyed by some of the readers. Wilhelm (1997) has detailed successful strategies, primarily through the use of art and drama, which he has employed for helping weaker readers visualize the action of the book in order to facilitate this deeper level of engagement.

A systematic shift is also needed if English is to be more than one person feeding in information to 26 teenagers. In the distribution of school resources, English needs to be recognised for what it is, a subject in which students are learning a range of creative and pragmatic skills and that mastery of these skills is liberating and enriching. The teaching and learning of reading and writing happens best in groups sized to allow for individual attention and manageable interaction. Subjects, which are aligned with the cultural priorities of recent times, such as Information Technology or Workplace Education have been supported with expensive infrastructure. Recognising the worth and the work of English beyond the particular VCE score a student achieves demands an equivalent commitment in school infrastructure.

8. 5 Teachers as practitioners of their subject

Sumara’s argument that “a teacher’s most important work is to create conditions whereby she and her students can enter into a creative world of enquiry that is new and interesting” (2002, p. 119) challenges the perception students were presenting of the notion of text as fixed entity and teacher as having the right answers. It is another reason to take seriously Pradl’s (1994) call for not always presenting oneself as the expert p.238-240). If we want our learning spaces to be shared reading spaces which are “new and interesting”, we need to be part of that exploration.

None of the comments suggested that students saw their teachers as practitioners of their subject. Only one student on one occasion had seen a teacher reading apart from set text study. Hesitant first readings were not part of the students’ experience. Research on the

value of students perceiving their teachers as practitioners of their subject has occurred more specifically in the field of teaching writing rather than teaching reading. However some of the learning that has occurred in the field of teaching writing could be transferred to the study of reading. The value of students seeing their teachers as practitioners has been identified (Atwell, 1987; Dahl, 1992; Gleeson, 1993) in terms of modelling and gaining expertise in the struggle of the craft of writing, thus being in a better position to help students. Having teachers model a task or even work with students on a task, was only reported upon in two instances. When it did happen, it was significant for the students.

Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler (2000) purport that one of the most serious hindrances to liberating teaching practices exists as a result of teachers being trapped in the style of teaching they encountered as students. (p.93) Their solution is for teachers to adopt the role of practitioners of their subject. In English, a teacher's ability "will be enabled by involvement in the sorts of creative and enquiry based activities" (p. 94) that are particular to the discipline. Similarly Agee (1998) who has researched teachers in their pre-service training has argued that many of the difficulties of these young teachers occur because they operate from a premise of familiarity. Agee's argument is that teaching by conviction or love of the subject needs to be supported by the work of developing sound pedagogical practices. Perhaps nothing would bring about change so quickly as teachers being required to undertake the tasks and activities currently being presented to students. Perhaps nothing would lift staff morale quite as much as teachers re-engaging passionately with the activities of English which first drew them to teaching.

The students' responses in this research and that of other researchers, suggests that what students would most like from teachers is as simple as 'being listened to'. Students enjoyed telling their stories of their own reading experiences as part of this research. They felt that both class dynamics and lack of provision in assigned tasks worked against them having enough opportunities in class to voice their own opinions. In their non-school book sharing friendships, they eagerly shared their views and wanted to share their books.

8.6 Attending to students' well-being

I did find that at times dealing with the subject of these texts could be very difficult. If as this research suggests in the case of these students, there is not a normalising process occurring, there is a need to attend to the quality of life of these students. I worked closely with ten students. During the two years in which the research period occurred, five of them suffered either a major family or personal trauma. While the trend exists for realist adolescent fiction to be published and selected as set texts, we ought to be mindful of the cost of revisiting related traumatic events in fiction. Some of the students' responses clearly indicated a high level of emotional engagement with events and characters of the books they were studying. If it is unrealistic to expect the closer knowledge of our students as has been advocated (Wilhelm, 1997), then a greater range of texts and tasks could lessen the likelihood of further trauma for specific students.

According to the student's reports it would seem that the teaching of critical literacy is only happening in a spasmodic and very limited way. But as Gore (1993) reminds us in a different context of empowering students, we need to recognise that our agency has limits, "our efforts will always be partial and inconsistent" (p.67). While a students' capacity to negotiate different textual meanings could be increased with a clearer focus on the development of critical literacy practices, its efficacy as a protective factor cannot be assumed, particularly in the case of the most vulnerable students.

In suggesting that this research indicates the need for an increased but balanced focus on teaching critical literacy practices, I would also argue that we as a profession need to apply the same critical practices to our teaching. Our classroom practices are not innocuous. Our students encounter a package of teaching practices and texts that reflect cultural, socio-political patterns of domination and suppression. This study has highlighted some of those factors which subtly contribute to an individual student's experience of set texts.

As part of that examination, additional vigilance is called for both in the setting of texts and in the setting of tasks associated with texts. The difficulty students had in reporting on texts studied in previous years challenged my notion of "the cumulative experience". However, the reported boredom particularly associated with set tasks, the intense

engagement of some students and for some students, the incidents of trauma in their non-school lives mirrored in some of the texts, suggests greater scrutiny needs to occur. If we accept the postmodern view that there is not a fixed meaning embedded in the text, we ought also be alert to the potential and multiple meanings individual readers might construe from the total school reading experience.

8.7 On-line chat as a potential teaching and learning tool

Perhaps the most significant discovery of all for myself was having my hunch that on-line chat could be a very useful learning tool, confirmed. Although Gary failed to meet Unit requirements, he wrote thousands of words of text response in a less formalised way in his on-line interviews. He articulated intrinsic critical literacy practices he had used, he responded immediately to whatever challenge I posed offering the kinds of ideas about texts that I would work hard to elicit in class from other students. It gave him a forum to articulate what he most loved about the books he was reading.

One of the most exciting dimensions of this study for me was the realisation that with some of the students our own “commonplace” (Sumara, 2002) had evolved in this act of research. This was particularly the case with Kimberley and Gary, two of the on-line interviewees. Gary told me that he had kept the transcripts from all our interviews. It is not exactly the pencilled comments in the margins of books as promoted by Sumara, but none the less, it is the recorded product of interpretation and re-interpretation by two people exploring the meaning of reading books.

On-line chatting has the potential to enable far more democratic processes, allowing the views of the shyest and least confident students to be voiced alongside the most outgoing class members. It is a medium that is engrossing for many students. It has the potential to provide commonplaces that are not necessarily limited by the confines of the classroom. The students who were dissatisfied by the level at which they felt their classes were pitched, may well find readers outside their school or their country with whom they can inquire and explore.

With the students' greater familiarity with the technology and the culture of on-line chat, it was I who was learning. Any notion of teacher/student hierarchy was challenged. It was an experience reminiscent of Faulkner's exuberance and tentativeness at moving in a new direction beyond the established patterns of teaching and learning and teacher/student relationships.

There is a sense of both excitement and apprehension in venturing into unfamiliar territory, especially when such territory belongs as much, if not more, to the students as to the teachers. It is this dynamic which blurs the relationship between the learner and teacher, the novice and the expert. The push across these kinds of boundaries is what is required if teachers are to drive educational practices forward to expanded understanding.

(Faulkner, 2002, p.276)

I do not want to present on-line chat as a problem-free methodological tool. It was not (see 5.7.2), but it certainly has characteristics that foster an energy and rapport that is unique and in the case of this research, enabled the data gathering to be done more thoroughly and effectively and democratically than would have been possible otherwise.

8.8 Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I was eager to have my questions answered and to a limited extent they have been. But, I fear that the task of researching which is problem based has caused a more negative text than it would be with a different focus. My mind has been opened to questions I could not have thought of five years ago. The students presented a range of diverse reading images. One of the most enduring is the image of the Year 9-10 Patrick reading *Lord of the Rings* to his younger brother. Martin, whose ambition is to be the next Peter Brock and who told me he would be reading car manuals over the holidays actually re-read his set text from first semester and then looked over his essay to see how his ideas had changed. Gary who failed four of his first VCE units, whose mother despairs because of the hours he spends on the computer, whose teachers despair because he will not hand in the work, wrote thousands of words about books as part of this research. When his friends are not at school, he takes himself up to the windswept stairwell on the top floor and reads. Hamish confessed that one of the reasons

he was having difficulty answering my questions on the set text (in the sixth week of term) was because he hadn't actually taken the book out of his bag. Kimberley, who chose a non-text-based English as soon as the opportunity arose and who just doesn't have time at the moment to read, has decided to become an English teacher.

I've always enjoyed English and people have made English an enjoyable subject for me, so I'd like to be able to do the same to someone...and I love teaching people...passing on some knowledge that I have, and then seeing people using it and understanding, is GREAT!

Set text study is not a large-scale version of private reading. It is a different process. A number of stages of the individual reading act have been eliminated; reading choice (Mackey and Johnston, 1994), false starts (Pradl, 1996, p. 238) and the immediate private pleasure after the actual reading of a book (Misson, 1998, p. 109). It has some of the elements of a reading group, but the distinctions are highly significant. One chooses whether or not to participate in a book club. Book clubs do not comprise 26 or 28 participants. Book clubs tend to be populated by people who share a love of reading and talking about reading. Students do not choose whether or not to do English or set text study. They do not choose their peers. But as some researchers have advised, there is much that we can learn from our own adult reading practices (Sumara, 1996, 2002; Van der Hoevan, 2002). This includes, the way we measure what we read, when we read, and how we reflect afterwards.

Underlying the overarching research question of this thesis have been the specific guiding sub questions. The final two of these, pertaining to the potential impact of character and situational representations exists because of what we have learnt about some students' lives. At different times as a profession, we have responded to the call to be more inclusive of students who are of minority racial groups, disadvantaged economic groups, homosexual or female. We ought also be willing to pay attention to those whose lives are disturbed by past or ongoing trauma.

At the beginning of this research I acknowledged my gratitude for the enduring pleasures and satisfactions that have resulted from my own set text reading. Throughout this thesis, I have reported on both the disenchantment and the intense engagement described by the

students in this study. I have talked with hundreds of other students and ex-students about their set text reading. I have reflected on the findings of others who have worked closely with students in trying to better the experience of school reading. I am reassured that shared reading experiences within the secondary school context can provide pleasure and understanding. The school reading experience can provide a particular context for close reading and attention to detail and through this “readers can improve the quality of their lived experiences (Sumara, 2002, p. xiv). We need to become more determined to have this work valued. We must ensure that the same systematic support exists to enable effective English teaching and learning processes to occur as exists for the learning that is most highly valued at this time in our political and socio-economic history. We need to become more imaginative about the practices within our classrooms and if we accept the role of co-learner with our students, I believe the benefits will not just advantage the students.

There is much to be learnt from the way these students spoke of their non-school reading and in particular, their most positive reflections on reading. We could attend to the detail in our students’ recounting of these positive reading experiences. Many students tell of their first reading experiences, of being read to by a parent replete with affection and affirmation and pleasure and assisted visualisation (Wilhelm, 1997 p. 5-6). Four of the students in this study exhibited a passionate enthusiasm for certain books, which they felt compelled to share with their peers. Others drew attention to the heightened pleasure of books by their association with holiday time or cosy solitude, and for others by the intimacy of reading to someone in their family. A school reading experience is different but we could consider ways of bringing these components to our classrooms.

In accepting that the inter-generational context of school reading can contribute to the quality of a students’ lived experiences, I accept too, that it can add to their distress. We need to be cognisant of our limitations in terms of others’ intertextual reading experiences. We cannot control or determine another person’s reading, but we ought to be mindful of the pain (Appleman, 2002; Shneidman, 2001) of some of our students. Perhaps at this time in our history when we are bewildered by the extent of serious depression, abuse and youth suicide, we could use our opportunity for storytelling to do as the Hasidic storytellers did (Zable, 2002); to use stories to lift our students out of the gloom, to use stories to sustain and nurture, rather than mirror what they already know too well.

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Appendix 1: Set texts studied by student participants

Year	Title	Author
7	Goodbye Vietnam	Gloria Whelan
	Space Demons	Gillian Rubenstein
	2 Weeks with the Queen	Morris Gleitzman
	Bridge to Terebithia	Katherine Patterson
8	Wolf	Gillian Cross
	Red Golf Balls	Laurine Croasdale
	Hitler's Daughter	Jackie French
	Chanearny	Steve Tolbert
	So Much to Tell You	John Marsden
	Goodbye Vietnam	Gloria Whelan
	Goodbye Mr Tom	Michelle Magorian
9	Children of the Dust	Anderson McCourt
	Z for Zachariah	Robert O'Brien
	Peeling the Onion	Wendy Orr
	A Midsummer Nights Dream	William Shakespeare
	Jinx	Margaret Wild
	Parvana	Deborah Ellis
	The Hobbit	J.R.R. Tolkien
10	Looking for Alibrandi	Melina Marchetta
	Pay it Forward	Catherine Ryan Hyde
	Ganglands	Maureen McCarthy
	Romeo and Juliet	William Shakespeare
	Strange Objects	Gary Crew
	Mandragora	David McRobbie
	Deadly Unna	Philip Gwynne

Appendix 2: Preliminary questionnaire

(Issued to students at the beginning of the research period)

1/ Can you sketch me a floor plan of your house? Then think about where the electronic/entertainment equipment and books/magazines/newspapers are kept. Sketch these in as well.

2/ Label the drawing with room location/sorts of equipment/ books etc

3/ Have you ever received a book as a gift? If *yes* can you describe, the book, the occasion, the giver and your reaction? If *no*, what would you think of receiving a book as a gift? What sort of book would you most like to get?

.....
.....
.....
.....

4/ Would you ever give books as gifts? Please comment.

.....
.....
.....
.....

5/ Do you have conversations with your friends about the books you've read? If you don't why don't you? If you do what sorts of things do you discuss?

.....
.....
.....
.....

6/ List the activities you most enjoy when you're mooching around home by yourself.

- a) b) c)
d) e)

7) List the activities you most enjoy when you're with friends

- a)..... b) c)
d) e)

8 Why did you agree to be part of this research project? (PTO)

Appendix 3: Table of individual student record of set text titles

In the first interview, or early in the research period for the MSN users, students were asked to complete this table with the titles and an assessment of their level of enjoyment of the books they had studied in secondary school.

Name.....

Homeroom.....

Title	Ranking
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it
	Loved it 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 Hated it

Comments

.....

PTO....

Appendix 4: Final questionnaire

(presented to students following final interview)

Name: Homeroom (2003).....

Age in years..... and months..... Date of Birth

Interview Method

1/ At the beginning of this research, Anne was wanting to know whether or not you responded to situations such as suicide, particular teenage activities, courageous acts. Are you able to add anything to this now?

.....
.....
.....
.....

2/ She also wondered how you reacted to characters such as the type of men or women being presented as adult characters in the books you were studying or whether you related to younger characters or identified with characters in a way that would make you want to act in the way they did.

.....
.....
.....
.....

3/ What were the reasons you agreed to be part of this research?

.....
.....
.....

4/ Can you think of times when those reasons influenced the sorts of answers you were able to give?

.....
.....
.....

Appendix 4: (Continued)

.....
.....

5/ Each of the students who participated in this research has a different relationship with Anne and that will have changed over the period of research.

Nature of relationship: 2002.....

Nature of relationship: 2003.....

Can you give examples of how your relationship with Anne influenced what you said?

.....
.....
.....
.....

6/ Half of the group who worked with Anne was interviewed in face-to-face interviews and the other half using MSN chat. Some of you used both.

Can you comment on how you found the interview process using the method you used?

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Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to this research?

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.....PTO

Appendix 5: Sample transcript from face-to-face interview (Hamish)

11th June, 2003

Anne: So this week is the very last week that I'm interviewing students and we've been interviewing now for one year. Do you remember the very first interview that we had?

Hamish: No.

Anne: You can't? OK so we've been interviewing for about a year and I've been asking you to think about the books that you've done. If you think back now on what set text study has been like for you, what can you say about it?

Hamish: Not much really.

Anne: So it's not a big part of your life?

Hamish. No, not really. Maybe because I haven't been doing any set texts this year, so it's kinda hard, it's a bit hard to think which one it was so...

Anne: So you're just thinking it's something in the past.

Hamish. Yes.

Anne: Do you think you've changed in any way because of any books that you've read?

Hamish: Um not really...maybe...I don't know...maybe after "Pay it Forward" but that'd probably be it.

Anne: So was it the most significant book for you?

Hamish.: Yep.

Anne: On your list you've given it a 9 and you gave *Goodbye Vietnam* a 9.

Hamish..Yeah.

Anne What was it that was so significant for you in "Pay it Forward"?

Hamish: Just the thought that maybe one person could change the world and even like with the little steps he was taking it can make a big significance...the impact on people.

Anne: So you're reading it and thinking, this is what one person can do?

Hamish: Are you also reading it and thinking this is what Hamish McDonald can do?

Hamish: Maybe.

Anne: And what about with Goodbye Vietnam? What was the significance for you in it?

Hamish: Um, it was a good read. Um ...and it seems to educate me and that on the war in Vietnam and what it was like for refugees.

Anne: So do you like that in a book, if you learn about another place or another era?

Hamish; Yes, yeah it depends on what it says and the way it's set out. Like in *Strange Objects*, it was kind of ...teaches you about the aboriginal ways an' all that, but I didn't think it was set out properly because it jumps back and forward too much and it just kind of loses you after a while.

Anne: So did that annoy you?

Hamish: Yes.

Anne You'd rather a straight forward narrative?

Hamish: Yeah

Anne: How did you find the Hobbit?...fantasy..

Hamish: I thought it was pretty good. I think it was because I'm a bit of a *Lord of the Rings* fan, but yeah, I thought it was pretty good.

Anne: OK. What have you learnt by doing four years of set texts?

Hamish: I don't know, just to look at a book differently and not just read it but you can also sit there and find...like...read between the lines and that sort of stuff.

Anne: And that 's worth doing?

Hamish: Ah, I sponse so.

Anne: And what about the thing of reading as a group, is that of any value to you? To have a shared book between a group of people?

Hamish: Um...I don't know. I normally like just reading a book by myself.

Anne: Do you ever read a book by yourself at this school?

Anne: Um not really.

Anne: if you wanted to where would you go and read?

Hamish: Probably just in the library.

Anne: Are you able to read in the library?

Hamish: Yeah.

Anne: So do you use the library much in terms of looking for new books or a book to read?

Hamish: Not really at the moment, I've just been using the library for study.

Anne: Do you see people sitting around in there reading?

Hamish: Not not really.

Anne: Ok. I asked you what you've learnt, now I want to ask you a different question. What have you been taught, so if you think from a teacher's point of view. What have they been trying to teach you with set texts?

Hamish: I'm not sure.

Anne: Why do you think teachers think books matter so much?

Hamish: don't know, bit with books like *Goodbye Vietnam* or *Strange Objects*, some of them can educate you a lot and...I don't know the other reasons...

Anne: Do you think the teachers who teach you enjoy the books?

Hamish: Um... a lot of the time yes.

Anne: Have you ever seen a teacher reading just for fun?

Hamish: Not really, no.

Anne: it's not something you've ever seen?

Hamish: No.

Anne: So if you're were going to make a recommendation to teachers, cause in a way you're saying it doesn't mean much. It hasn't been a big part of my life. I've almost forgotten it, what would you say? What would be your recommendations to teachers?

Hamish; I don't know with T. S/he copied out bits and pieces from the book of the books and um printed them onto paper so we had stuff to go through and s/he did most of the questions on what he'd printed off, so it was a bit easier to retrace instead of having to read through the book a second time.

Anne: So s/he's already had the relevant part chosen, so you liked that? Good. Can you think of any other specific examples where teachers have done something that's helped you?

Hamish: Um, not really, but it has been a long time.

Anne; Is there anything you want to ask me?

Hamish. Nah

Anne: Can you think of any strong adult male characters that you've read about?

Hamish: Not really.

Anne: Did *Goodbye Mr Tom* have any?

Hamish: Yeah Tom what's his name with... seemed to be a pretty strong character just and a likeable person. First he seemed a bit...the idea of having Kip was a bit foreign to him but he kind of turned around to it and um seemed ... foster parents and that back in the war days.

Anne: So that's really stayed with you, cause that was way back in Year 8. And you mentioned the teacher in *Pay it Forward*?

Hamish: yep, yep.

Anne: What about female characters, Did any of them appeal to you?

Hamish: um. Probably Kelly in *Ganglands*.

Anne: Why did she appeal to you?

Hamish: Don't know. She seemed like a good kind of person , it was set out a lot just cause she was the main character and that.

Interruption: bell/PA (inaudible)

Anne: and I was also wondering did students get much enjoyment from their reading of set texts?

Hamish: I spose in some cases yes.

Anne: What about in your case?

Hamish: Yes, I got some enjoyment I spose...better than doing page after page of writing

Anne: so compared with the other things you might have to do in English!!! So as you're walking towards an English class, what's your attitude to being there?

Hamish: Kind of half and half.

Anne: Have you ever had any experiences where you've felt "Yes, I'm really learning something here".

Hamish: In some cases yes, but probably not really with set texts,

Hamish: cause I didn't have the book I needed.

Anne: And what about reading out of school. Are you doing any reading out of school?

Hamish: at the moment. I'm re-reading The Hobbit. Apart from that not really.

Anne: So at the moment you're doing an English that doesn't have any books at all. What do you think your life would have been like if you'd done English all the way through without any books?

Hamish: I don't know. I wouldn't have been able to talk as much about books with you over the past year.

Anne: Well that's good for me but does it make a difference to you?

Hamish: Umm...I don't know what it would be like, but if I wasn't doing any at all, I wouldn't know what it was like.

Explanation of finishing up/ checking transcripts.

Appendix 6: Sample transcript from on-line interview (Gary)

7th April, 2003

Never give out your password or credit card number in an instant message conversation.

annieg says:

hi gary. r u ready to chat or r u chatting with someone else?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

<gasp!> I forgot all about it!

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I'm ready to chat!

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

annieg says:

thanx

annieg says:

do u remember u told me about Catcher in the Rye?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

Yup.

annieg says:

How highly did you rank that book?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

Nine and a half out of Ten.

annieg says:

have any set texts come close/

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nim was about 7/10, but that's about s close s it gets.

annieg says:

so if u had done it (Catcher...) as a set text would it stay at nine and a half?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Absolutely.

annieg says:

could the sorts of things u have to do in set text study have increased your level of enjoyment?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Ummm..... maybe, but I think the book holds the strongest factor.

annieg says:

when did u read it?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

In October, I think. Maybe September./

annieg says:

So does that mean if the book is good enough it won't matter what you have to do in class

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

**September*

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Nah, I never have a ball-of-a-time writing essays, but it would make it more interesting.

annieg says:

how do u mean it would make it more interesting?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

If it was an analysis on Romeo and Juliets' relationships, or something like that, I wouldn't be as pleased as I would to do the same with Holden Caulfield.

annieg says:

because u were interested in him as a character???

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Yup.

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Romeo irritates me.....

annieg says:

was it this character (HC) that gave the book so much appeal?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

That was one of the big points, I don't think it would've been much with out Holden.

annieg says:

can u remember ur thoughts/emotions as u read the book

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

uh, I sort of have a gist, but not much more. I'd have to read it again.

annieg says:

i read it not so long ago

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I could read it again, if you want.

annieg says:

do u like re-reading books you've enjoyed?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

Most books, some are just the kind I can't read more than once... If I do it again, it feels like I'll spoil it.

annieg says:

well if you're happy to read it again i'd be fascinated to hear your response to rereading it

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

Okiedokey

annieg says:

there are copies in the school library

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I'll try and get one tomorrow. I don't have a library card, and they have one on order for me, which I can't pay for....

annieg says:

a few of the other kids i am interviewing seem to enjoy books where the characters live really

different lives from themselves e.g. Parvana is the story of a girl in Afghanistan. It was a set text last year. What is your opinion of this type of book?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I don't know, I'd have to read it. I've read a few books like that, but I can only clearly remember one, 'Goodbye Vietnam', and it was far from good...

annieg says:

I remember you saying that a while ago (do u mean you need \$2.00? for your library card?)

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I thought I needed five dollars.

annieg says:

I don't know, they don't charge teachers

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I channel all of my money into swimming....

annieg says:

is swimming expensive?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

Not really, but Mum gives me entrance money and busfare.... I hate asking for more.....

annieg says:

fair enough but I think we'd better organise a library card

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

One of these days....

annieg says:

back to the books, do u remember Looking for Alibrandi?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

Yup, quite well, I think.

annieg says:

The author Melina Marchetta has just released another book called Saving Francesca, will u be borrowing that when it comes into the library?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

I don't usually borrow books from the school library, I get them from other people or the City oje.

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

**one*

annieg says:

ok but what I'm wondering is r u interested to read this book?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Nah, not really. I've got heaps all queued up first....

annieg says:

so Looking for Alibrandi didn't appeal that much?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Not really, not at all.

annieg says:

just testing!

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

:0

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

annieg says:

what are you reading right now?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

I'm still reading 'Crossroads of Twilight', I spend far too much time at swimming to finish it....

annieg says:

u were telling me the other day at school that u were really disappointed with this book. Is that still the case?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

*I'm not really disappointed.... just... disappointed.... it wasn't a let down, but it has no climax. It sets up a sh*tload of stuff to happen in the next books, though. (Please excuse my language)*

annieg says:

so u think it's a marketing ploy?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

Nah, it's the beginning of the end of The Wheel of Time.... it's setting up Tarmon Gaidin (The Last Battle).

annieg says:

So is Robert Jordan a good writer?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

He's great.

annieg says:

New topic: what's happening with your school reading at the moment?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

In English?

annieg says:

yep

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

We aren't reading anything, just performing our book reviews.

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

I did mine on the Hitch-Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy.

annieg says:

Performing your book reviews, how do u perform a book review?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

It's an oral one.

annieg says:

ok what r u doing yours on?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

I did mine on the Hitch-Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy.

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

I read it about six months ago, but I can remember almost everything. I can even quote some of it.

annieg says:

**I'm impressed!
So you could please yourself?**

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Yup!

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

annieg says:

So u were happy about being able to choose??

one of the things that people might consider valuable about set texts is being able to talk about a book with a group of people who have also read it. Is that of any calue to u?

annieg says:

***value**

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

It is, but it's not essential.

annieg says:

but u do takj to fellow readers who r ur friends out of class???

annieg says:

*** do talk**

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Yup, but none of them have read any of the Doom books, and they're still great, and I read them over again.

annieg says:

Not so long ago I read a book I absolutely loved and found myself going to the net to find out more about the author/other books/opinions of other readers, do u ever do that?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Nah, not really. I did that once, but never found any of Neal Shustermans' stuff.

annieg says:

do u know what the next book u do 4 school will be?
Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

No idea.

annieg says:

do you care?
Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Nah, not really. I could deal with it,

annieg says:

what is your attitude when the bell goes for english this year?
Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Something like..... 'Oh, yay, English is over, I have to find a new, more interesting method of switching off in the next class.'

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

annieg says:

do you or the kids talk about the different Englishes on offer now?
Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Yeah, (friend) and I talk about how much he hates his class.

annieg says:

i actually meant what is your attitude when the bell goes indicating its time for u to move 2 english
Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Ah. Something like..... 'Oh, yay, English is coming, I have to find a new, more quiet method of stuffing around with Steve and Adam.'

annieg says:

does Ben hate it cause of the books or the activities or the style?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

The activities, his classmates, the teaching, the book..... The only thing he does like is how stupidly easy it is.

annieg says:

of all the things teachers have done in your secondary school english life, what things have
a) most contributed to your enjoyment of set texts?
b) most contributed to your learning re set texts?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Hehe,

A) letting me read it upside down was fun.....

B) I don't really know.... just helping me to develop my ideas was probably the biggest one.

annieg says:

so how did that teacher help you to develop your ideas?

with the activities you have been required to do, what do you feel you have learnt?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

The teacher got irritated with A) rather quickly, though.

annieg says:

i'm not surprised!!!!

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

um, just when I'm stuck, and the teacher helped me see where I was going, I'm learning to do it myself... aside from that, I can't remember my english skills really changing.... just sort of growing.

annieg says:

but u do have a sense that they've grown?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Not really.... but I can see that I'm better at it...

annieg says:

so I'm wondering is that just natural growth with your own persona and intellectual growth or has direct "teaching" helped?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

*Direct teaching has helped, I wouldn't have bothered learning them
without being pushed.*

annieg says:

**so are there specific strategies that have been
useful for you or is it just having someone there
who makes you get on with it?**

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Just having an Iron fisted Dictator.

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

I think.

annieg says:

mmmm

annieg says:

**new question
how did u learn to be a good swimmer?**

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

throwing myself in the water, and almost drowning a few times....

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

*I did the same with Ice-skating... I use the falling as incentive to
learn faster.*

annieg says:

**uh so is there a parallel with becoming a good
reader?**

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

*I think so... I dunno... I think you just have to do it until you get
it.*

annieg says:

so why is that some kids hate reading?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

T.V is more interesting, or they just don't like sitting for hours reading, or they've just never had the opportunity to read, and they have to be shown....

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I dunno.

annieg says:

some kids seem to never have that experience of being totally into a book

annieg says:

which from my point of view seems a great pity but I don't know how to give it to kids

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

I dunno.....

For an example, my uncle Bradley is a Petrol Head. He loves cars, motorbikes, etc., and couldn't read in grade 6. Then Mr. West (the Principal) gave him a motorbike magazine, and he was, 'What's this say, Mr. West?', and 'What's this word?' etc. He doesn't read novels, or anything very often, but he does.

annieg says:

Great story!

how much reading do u expect to do over the easter break? Do you have anything planned?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

yeah, I think that'd be a way....

I dunno. I've got a lot on, but I dunno... I'll just read when I can.

annieg says:

Ok

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. --- says:

What about you?

annieg says:

I want to reread my best book this year, "Unless" and there's a junior fiction writer I've just heard about David Almond that I'd like to read.

annieg says:

we're going up to the Murray over Easter itself so that's pretty conducive to reading. Otherwise we've got a few friends coming and we're going up to Swan Hill for a 21st.

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Righto, sounds like fun!

annieg says:

you bet! i was born for holidays!

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

I'm just gonna be swimming my backside off.

annieg says:

r u so fit??? have fun gary. well we've chatted for nearly 50 mins so thanxs a lot

annieg says:

again your ideas are interesting and so useful

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

I'm not that fit....

Ok, then. Thank you!

annieg says:

if u do re-read Catcher let me know when you've finished, ok?

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

Ok, then, I will!

annieg says:

I thought you would be fit from swimming

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

I'm fit enough, but not as much as I'd like to be...

annieg says:

See you tomorrow

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---
says:

ok, buhbais!

annieg says:

goodnight

Angels, lend me your might; forfeit all my lives to get just one right. ---

says:

Nigh~nighties!

Appendix 7: Sample transcript from on-line interview (Kimberley)

10th April, 2003

Never give out your password or credit card number in an instant message conversation.

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

hi anne!

annieg says:

hi kimberley am I late?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

nope.. but ur really lucky i dint forget about u!

annieg says:

i was just ambling home when my daughter said "thought you had an interview" i flew!!

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

lolz

annieg says:

have u been sic

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

nah, well u said 8, so ur fine..

annieg says:

i haven't seen u at school 4 a while

annieg says:

have u been awol

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeh .. i dont know what it is... im going to the doctor tomorrow

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

lolz.. nope i wasnt wagging..

annieg says:

r u ready to start

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yep

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

just got rid of all my other friends.. im all good

annieg says:

i want to start with a topic dear to ur heart

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

ok then

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

scott..?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

hehhe

annieg says:

do ur friends know y u got rid of them?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

nope.. i didnt bother explaining..

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

it just easier to say iv gotta go

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

but most of them know about this anyway

annieg says:

good! Question 1

annieg says:

what do you think of the adult male characters you have encountered in the set texts u've studied in secondary school

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

hmmm well, obviously, being a female, i tend to relate better with the female characters..

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm wat do i think of them...

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

not really sure..

annieg says:

in another interview u spoke about anna in peeling the onion as a role model, r there any other characters you admire or would want to be like?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm.. in most books i read, i guess i find a favourite character, and that would be an admirable person, but really.. mainly strong characters with a lot of self confidence are the ones i tend to really like.. once again, looking for

alibrandi is a book ill refer to, and josie.. she was really a character that i would like to be like i guess.. she wasnt afraid of being herself.. thats a pretty

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

admirable trait in a person

annieg says:

so you have encountered a couple of strong female characters?

annieg says:

they are both young can u remember any older women from the books whom you could describe as admirable?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

hmm yeah, well the kind of books i read tend to have younger people in it and well, the older people are really like parents.. and i guess authors try to get into teenagers heads a bit and dont really include much of the parents.. or if they are included, then they are not really portrayed as good people.. more like annoying old people..

annieg says:

in ur own life do you have people whom you admire or see as potential role models?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

i like to be able to look at people and say i would like to be like them.. in a way, i guess thats how we choose our friends...

annieg says:

yes.

interesting comment about the way adults r portrayed, can u give me any specific example of these "annoying old people"

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

annoying old people.. LFA once again- nonna is definently a god example

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

*good

annieg says:

yes

annieg says:

wot type of older male characters have u encountered

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

older males really just tend to be parents of a teenager or something in my books..

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

they dont really play much of a part..

annieg says:

yes i'm trying to find some example of strong male charcters, the way u see Anna and Josie, but i'm struggling

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeah.. i really cant think of a book right now that is even written from the point of view of a male..

annieg says:

i wonder if the set texts are more suited to girls rather than boys????

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

females seem to be more emotional people, so i guess its better to write from a females perspective..

annieg says:

have u ever had a conversation with boys from school about books

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeah, i think so actually... as far as relating to the characters go.. girls find it much easier to relate than the guys do

annieg says:

do u know that Melina Marchetta's new book Saving Francesca was released on Friday

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

no i dont think i ever have.. we've talked about everything BUT books i think

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

oh really?? ill have to get my hands on that one.. it should be pretty good if its anything like LFA

annieg says:

i will be interested to hear ur reaction

annieg says:

new topic

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

ok then

annieg says:

Can you think back to the holidays

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm yep

annieg says:

and tell me about the proportion of time u would have spent on the computer

annieg says:

compared with reading

annieg says:

compared with going to movies

annieg says:

compared with watching tv

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm.. well, i dont actually watch much television anymore.. the movies i go to occasionally..

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm reading.. i did a fair bit of that because i was up in Merrimbula doing nothing.. and computer i was on msn a bit..t

annieg says:

when u say u don't actually watch TV anymore, i'm wondering wot has changed

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

um not really sure actually.. work experience really stuffed up one of my favourite shows actually..

annieg says:

Lucky u Merimbula, did the family go? so how many books would u have read?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

all saints is sooo unrealistic after being in a hospital for a week!

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yep i went with my family.. umm i read about 5 books over the 10 days i think..

annieg says:

any good ones

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm well i was really just re reading old books of mine..
mum bought me a new book, but id already read it.. it was
the last book in the tommorow series- john marsden..

annieg says:

apart from msn how much time would u spend
on the computer during holiday

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

apart from msn.. probably about an hour for the whole
holidays

annieg says:

were they favourite old books

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm yeah just old 'sweet valley high' books that i used to
read, LFA, tommrow when the war began.. old classics that i
re read ALOT

annieg says:

so ur not really a big computer user, would
that be the same during school time

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

during school time.. well i use it a fair bit during school time..
im on msn a fair bit, but when ive got assignments to do, im
on the computer alot of the night

annieg says:

now for the big question i want the truth on
average how much time i.e. how many hours
would you spend on msn a) during the
holidays and b) during school time per
average week

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

per week.. school weeks- about 6 hours a week.. during the
holidays is tricky.. it depends what im doing.. it can range
from nothing to about 10 hrs i think

annieg says:

do u ever play computer games

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

nope..

annieg says:

why not

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm i play on the nintendo over at my neighbours place, but thats with 4 of us there to yell and scream together.. i need to be able to interact with people.. compter games and tv bore me

annieg says:

re msn: do you ever chat to people you don't know or is it always to friends

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm if someone i don't know has added me to their list then ill talk and check it out, if i dont like the sound of them ill block them, but other than that, i talk to friends

annieg says:

so would u ever talk to someone from another country

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm if they were telling me the truth.. so basically, if someone introduced me to them.. there are so many people online that i dont trust, so i really tend to stick to people in australia..

annieg says:

what if there was a chat room for LFA fans would u join in that

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeah probably

annieg says:

have u looked up any websites on peeling the onion or LFA?

annieg says:

or

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

but they're the kind of chat that i used to go into so that i could lie about myself and have fun..

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

nope.. i havent actuall

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

y

annieg says:

used 2 go into??

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

that was when the net was new, i used to go over to a friends place and use her internet to go into a chat room.. when i got the net and msn, i really just started to talk to people i knew

annieg says:

new topic: how is ur life different now that u don't have any set texts

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm.. i havent really given it much thought.. i prefer it actually.. its like im using my brain more for english.. this english is actually more challenging.. i have to think about it!!

annieg says:

do u miss them

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

a little bit.. its quite relaxing to sit back in class and listen to a novel being read to you..

annieg says:

has that happened often

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm, yeah we used to always sit in class with the novel and follow as it was read out loud

annieg says:

when u are a teacher will u read novels to ur students

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeh probably.. its something that i enjoyed, so yes i think i would read the novel to my class to help them enjoy something that i did

annieg says:

gr8

annieg says:

when ur a teacher will u use msn in ur teaching

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

well, i wouldnt be surprised if i did actually... the nets becoming such a huge part of teaching, so I wouldnt be surprised..

annieg says:

Let ur imagination go how could it be used well in teaching/learning

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

hmm... its a hard one...

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

it could be referred back to language use

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

the acceptance of all the 'internet words'

annieg says:

Last hard question: if u had never ever done set texts at school how would ur life be different

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

lolz

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm i probably wouldnt really appreciate reading as much as i do now

annieg says:

how have set texts enabled u to appreciate reading

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

umm well, when you're forced to read certain types of books, you tend to read books that you wouldnt otherwise pick up and read for yourself..

annieg says:

and that has been worthwhile for u

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

in ways then, i guess its broadened my mind there a bit

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeah definitely.. even if i didnt like some of the books at the time, it was all worth it

annieg says:

now that u know saving francesca is out will u make it a point to get a copy?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeh, i think so..

annieg says:

how

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

well, i was just wondering whether the library would be getting a copy actually.. but i also might buy it myself if i like it

annieg says:
do u buy many books

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
yeah, ive bought LOTS of books!!

annieg says:
do u go into the library and ask them to buy a book u want

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
too many for my cupboards actually

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
nope.. do they do that?

annieg says:
so do u spend ur pocket money on books

annieg says:
yep they kids who want to read

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
well, i dont really get pocket money.. mum just buys stuff that i need for me instead of giving me the money

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
hmm,.... theres a good idea..

annieg says:
so she would give u the money for a book u wanted

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
yep

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
she encourages reading, so yeah defienttly

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

annieg says:
Last easy question:

annieg says:
earlier u said ur friends were aware u were doing this research
what was their reaction?

Kimberley4scott4eva says:
well... jodie actually has some problems with identifying teachers as real people.. so her reaction was really 'your

doing what?!', some people read my diary and say 'anne.. gleeson?? wat!!' ummm but yeah most people just dont really care...

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

there arent really that many people that would do it though actually.. very surprising..

annieg says:

jodie of all people

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

lolz yeh shes a funny one!

annieg says:

she is pretty special! there is not a lot of research done from the student's perspective

annieg says:

so that's why im doubly grateful to all u who r participating

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

no theres not really a lot of research done like this.. i guess most research comes from the 'top' so to speak not the 'bottom'

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

yeh, its great !

annieg says:

here's to the bottom I thought there was a champagne glass in the emoticons, a t cup will have 2 do once again u have been very generous ...

annieg says:

thankyou!!!!!!

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

lolz..

nah, no problems

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

im happy to do it!

annieg says:

gr8

go chat to ur mates and i'll c u at school when ur feeling better

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

lolz ok then.. ill have to b back by thursday!!

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

i have to see the kids!!

annieg says:

if ur really sick let us know

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

sure, will do

annieg says:

!c ya Kimberley goodnight

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

goodnight!

annieg says:

Kimberley4scott4eva says:

Appendix 8: Documents pertaining to ethics procedures

- a) Letter to students
- b) Letter to parents
- c) Consent form
- d) University permission