English and Difference

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Walk into a classroom of thirty students and you are confronted with the fact of difference: the thirty-odd students are not all alike. They come in different shapes and sizes, with different experiences and histories – and often with different languages, cultures and expectations of schooling. Schools work with and against these differences in various ways. An insistence upon conformity and uniformity is an insistence on a separation of school from the world beyond, where these differences have their origin and where they continue to flourish. That can be construed as one of the main functions of school uniform – a statement about a particular identity that is to be adopted in school. At the same time, school uniform means different things in different places. In North American and Scandinavian societies, it is almost a thing unknown; in a number of South American countries, it functions as a near-universal marker of school student identity, with the same uniform being worn by students across the whole country (Dussel, 2005). In England, uniform functions as a marker of individual school identity – the uniform as a school-specific brand, as it were – as well as, in most cases, a signifier of gender (though this is being challenged in some places). Along with uniform rules comes a whole series of proscriptions, relating to makeup and jewellery, piercings, hairstyles and hair lengths, bags, coats and other accessories. The meaning of all these prohibitions is to construct a school identity that is different and separate from the students' out-of-school identities, cultures, ways of being in the world. And yet, while enforcing uniformity in some aspects of student identity, formal education constructs other forms of difference.

Different pathways for different learners?

In Anglophone education systems, there is a long history of treating learners differently – and an equally long history of justifying this differential provision on the basis of the innate characteristics of different groups of learners.[1] Here is an example from the Norwood Report (Board of Education [BoE], 1943). It takes as a given the 'diversity of human endowment' (BoE, 1943, p.2) and presents the argument that, for mass education to be possible, it is necessary to group students together on the basis of a commonality of 'capacities and interests' (ibid.):

> The evolution of education has in fact thrown up certain groups, each of which can and must be treated in a way appropriate to itself. Whether such groupings are distinct on strictly psychological grounds, whether they represent types of mind, whether the differences are differences in kind or in degree, these are questions which it is not necessary to pursue. Our point is that rough groupings, whatever may be their ground, have in fact established themselves in general educational experience, and the recognition of such groupings in educational practice has been justified both during the period of education and in the after-careers of the pupils. (BoE, 1943, p.2)

The Norwood Report prepared the ground for the 1944 Education Act and hence for the introduction of universal secondary education in England and Wales. Its representation of the differences among learners mattered: it had practical implications for the way in which schools were organised in the postwar period, with the tripartite division of (government-funded) secondary education into grammar schools, technical schools and secondary moderns.

[1] For a compelling account of the ways in which the whole history of the scientific measurement of human intelligence is implicated in ideologies of racial difference, see Gould (1981).

The ‘groupings’, the report concedes, may be somewhat imprecise and there may be some debate about the nature of the differences that they reflect, but these matters can be left unresolved: the categories have ‘established themselves’ – an interesting use of the agentless passive – and are, in effect, common sense. Such categories are the practical logic of education, and of employment. The report goes on to sketch out what these groupings look like, starting with the kind of learner who will benefit from a grammar school education:

> … the pupil who is interested in learning for its own sake, who can grasp an argument or follow a piece of connected reasoning, who is interested in causes, whether on the level of human volition or in the material world, who cares to know how things came to be as well as how they are, who is sensitive to language as expression of thought, to a proof as a precise demonstration, to a series of experiments justifying a principle: he is interested in the relatedness of related things, in development, in structure, in a coherent body of knowledge. He can take a long view and hold his mind in suspense; this may be revealed in his work or in his attitude to his career. He will have some capacity to enjoy, from an aesthetic point of view, the aptness of a phrase or the neatness of a proof. …
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> Such pupils, educated by the curriculum commonly associated with the Grammar School, have entered the learned professions or have taken up higher administrative or business posts. (ibid.)

Then there is the second category of learner: one for whom abstract thought does not come naturally, whose interests lie rather in ‘the field of applied science or applied art’ (BoE, 1943, p.3). Such a pupil might belong in the technical schools. The final grouping (‘of pupils and … of occupations’) has markedly different characteristics:

> The pupil in this group deals more easily with concrete things than with ideas. He may have much ability, but it will be in the realm of facts. He is interested in things as they are; he finds little attraction in the past or in the slow disentanglement of causes or movements. His mind must turn its knowledge or its curiosity to immediate test; and his test is essentially practical. … Because he is interested only in the moment he may be incapable of a long series of connected steps; relevance to present concerns is the only way of awakening interest, abstractions mean little to him. Thus it follows that he must have immediate returns for his effort … (BoE, 1943, p. 3)

What Norwood presents, then, is three types of learner, for whom three different secondary curricula are appropriate; these learners and these curricula then map fairly neatly onto the existing class structure in postwar Britain. Thus the system that is envisaged is one that that simultaneously meets the 'aptitudes' of individual children and the needs of an advanced capitalist society. What is more, it promises to do this without any unpleasantness, without causing distress or disappointment to any of the participants – and in such a way that existing class identities and inequalities are reproduced.

The authors of the Norwood Report perform an alchemy that both enables publicly-funded secondary education to fulfil the function of allocating roles within a stratified society and provides a humane justification for such stratification. What drives the system, they suggest, is not the needs of industry or the interests of the industrialists but human nature itself, or rather the different natures that are ascribed to different categories of learner: some are apt for abstract thought and disinterested speculation, while others are happier with concrete things.

These ideas may seem to belong in a distant past. What, then, of a much more recent report from the Sutton Trust, *Potential for Success: Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools*:

> Highly able students are defined in this report as students with high attainment, but also those with the potential for high attainment. Harnessing the potential of this group is an important goal for the education system. (Montacute, 2018, p. 3)

The emphasis, throughout this report, is on the promotion of social mobility through the identification of, and appropriate provision for, 'highly able' students. There is, however, as there was in the Norwood Report, an underlying assumption that such a group exists – that there are some children who possess 'the potential for high attainment' (and others, by implication, who do not). Indeed, this conception of an individual child's 'potential' as something that is both fixed and knowable seems like plain common sense, so deeply embedded is it in the dominant discourses and practices of schooling.

For a somewhat contrary view, let's return for a moment to the 1940s. The Norwood Report's identification of three types of learner, and hence of the tripartite division of secondary education, was vigorously contested by those arguing for comprehensive schools, catering 'for all children within a particular area from the age of eleven-plus to the time when they leave school ... ' (Cole, n.d., p. 5).

> … we on the L.C.C. [London County Council] deny the two assumptions, on which most of the secondary education of to-day is based, that there are three types of child and three only – the grammar child, the technical child, and the modern child, of which the grammar child is "the best". Anyone with practical experience of children knows that both these assumptions are nonsense. There are not three "types" of child (or grown person, for that matter) but many types; and what we have to do, if we want to secure that every child receives the kind of education which best fits it for adult life and service to the community, is to see that courses of study are provided in schools which will bring out and develop every child's particular gifts. (Cole, n.d., p.5)

These words are from a pamphlet, published in about 1950 by the London Labour Party, in defence of 'The London School Plan' (LCC, 1947), a coherent and ambitious proposal for comprehensive schooling across the capital. It is a vehement rebuttal of the Norwood Report's attempt to cast the three types of school as equivalent: this was an unequal system, in esteem, resources and outcomes. What was at stake here, as Margaret Cole's pamphlet insisted, was not only a city-wide building programme but also a different model of learning and of learners. Indeed, the former was predicated on the latter:

> Every teacher of any sense knows that children grow and change, that "late developers", who looked hopelessly backward at eleven years old, may grow into adults of remarkable capacity, that their skills may shift in emphasis from memory to craft and *vice versa.* We say that any sound educational system will be on the look-out for such changes in the child and suit itself to them; that any attempt to make a final selection at eleven years is stupid, and that where, additionally, social prestige is attached to one particular kind of school, it is not merely stupid, it is cruel as well. (Cole, n.d., p. 6)

Recognising 'every child's particular gifts', for Cole, was not at all the same as placing children on a linear scale of 'ability' or 'intelligence'. She saw the symbolic violence done to those children and young people whom the system of selection casts as rejects (cf. Archer et al., 2018; Whitwham, 2017).

For the authors of the Norwood Report, differences among learners were represented as the basis for different types of school. Then, as more recently, such differences have also informed the decisions made within schools about how learners should be grouped. Differences in ability or attainment are ascribed to individuals as the basis for allocating those individuals to teaching groups. Difference is thus the factor in grouping decisions. But once

the individuals are placed in the groups, within-group difference is effaced. In a context where pupils are grouped by ability:

> The class generally works on the same material at the same speed. In other words, streaming is an organizational device and promotes a teaching style which minimizes individual differences. … Mixed ability grouping forces us to notice and take into account the specific strengths and weaknesses, interests and idiosyncrasies, of individual children, and treat each according to need. (Mills, 1977, pp. 2-3)

Mills' claim was substantiated by Boaler's (1997) research in Maths. Boaler observed that the same teachers taught differently depending on the grouping arrangement. When the class was one that had been formed by placing together students of notionally similar abilities, the teachers assumed a homogeneity in pace of learning as well as in ability. They taught on the basis of their expectations of the students (with the result that individual learners became disheartened because they could not keep up or bored because they had already completed the work). When, on the other hand, the teachers were working with groups that they regarded as mixed-ability classes, they adopted a different pedagogy, one that was much more attentive to individual needs and strengths.

In the current data-rich era of high-stakes assessment, Norwood's three categories of learner are alive and well. In schools in England, it is common to hear talk of 'HAPS', 'MAPS' and 'LAPS' (high-attaining, mid-attaining and low-attaining pupils). The labels are part of an accountability machine; they have the effect, though, of reifying judgements of performance that might properly be regarded as more local and contingent. Difference of attainment (and, even if this sometimes remains implicit, of ability) is located in the learner.

Ability thus becomes an explanatory concept to account for differences in achievement, attainment, performance. There is, however, a substantial body of research evidence that

might make us question this assumption (cf. Hart et al., 2004). What if the technologies of schooling created the very differences for which they are supposed to cater?[2] This happens most conspicuously when learners are sent to different schools on the basis of a prior ascription of ability. But it also happens when learners are divided into different classes on the same basis.[3] And, as the research into English teaching by Kress et al. (2005) demonstrated, it even happens within mixed attainment classes. Their multimodal analysis revealed how difference in ability is constructed moment by moment in the minutest detail of classroom interaction: how the teacher's position, posture, gaze, gesture, as well as language, all operate to confer and confirm different 'levels' of ability that are ascribed to individual learners and groups of learners.

One response to this might be to give up – to conclude that educational systems, at least in countries like the UK, are, in essence, sorting devices. In this account, the move towards comprehensive secondary schools in the period from the 1960s was at least as much a reflection of the shifting pattern of employment, the increase in white-collar jobs, as it was a response to the arguments for more socially just structures of schooling. What confronts us now, in the era of high-stakes and fine-grained accountability systems, is also a reflection of wider societal changes: in our neoliberal times, difference is to be recorded and tracked on the spreadsheet, where minute calculations of 'added value' are to be made in relation to the attainment of each individual learner. But a different response is possible.

[2] A parallel argument has been made by Gemma Moss (2007) in relation to literacy and gender. Rather than approaching gender as a pre-existing category that can be used to account for differential success in reading, for example, Moss looks closely at how gender is constituted in the classroom – and at how it is differently constituted in different classrooms. What emerges from her study of primary classrooms is a much more complex picture of the situated construction of gendered identities and literacy practices.

[3] See, for example, the findings of a 2007 research report, which noted that 'Social class is a significant predictor of set placement. Pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have a higher probability of being placed in lower sets *irrespective of prior attainment*' (Dunne et al., 2007, p. x, emphasis added).

From an alternative perspective, the progressive restructuring of education, partially accomplished in comprehensive schools and in moves towards mixed attainment grouping, was, at best, an unfinished project. Structural changes were only partially achieved: grammar (and independent) schools lived on, and mixed attainment grouping was only ever a minority pursuit within comprehensive schools (Benn & Chitty, 1996). Equally important, though, is the recognition that such changes in the grouping of learners, whether between schools, within schools or within classes, require a similarly radical reconceptualisation of curriculum and pedagogy.

Different 'funds of knowledge'

Thinking differently about students' ability involves different conceptions of teaching and learning, of assessment and of knowledge. To begin to explore this claim, I want to focus on a single incident as a way of exemplifying the implications of a different approach to 'ability' and to difference. It is a moment from my own classroom experience, teaching a mixed attainment class of 13- and 14- year-olds in a school in East London (Yandell, 2001).

We had just started to read *Romeo and Juliet*, beginning with Juliet's soliloquy from the balcony scene ('What's in a name?'). I was using a piece of software, *Developing Tray*, which presents the text in a radically incomplete form, thus inviting the students to make predictions as a way of collaboratively constructing the speech. The class had made progress, working out a great deal about the speaker and her situation as well as filling in most of the gaps in the text. It was clear, too, that many of the students had quite considerable prior knowledge of the play – knowledge that they recalled and shared with one another as they read.

Then, thirty minutes into the lesson, Michael arrived. Michael was an infrequent attender, in more than one sense: he was often absent and, even when physically present in the classroom, tended to pay scant attention to the lesson going on around him. He knew a great deal about cars (and how to steal them) and was also quite adept at removing money from parking meters (as well as smaller children). On this occasion, Michael slumped in his chair and seemed disinclined to contribute to what was going on.

The rest of the class was focusing on the final lines of Juliet's speech:

> Romeo, doff thy name;
> And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
> Take all myself.

'Doff' is one of the very few words in the speech that might present a problem to most Year 9 students, so I engaged in a rather exaggerated routine with David, asking him to 'doff' the baseball cap that he habitually wore. And then, just as I was preparing to bring the reading to a triumphant conclusion, ensuring that everyone in the room understood how Juliet had, in the course of this speech, resolved the tension between her loyalty to her family and her love for Romeo, Michael intervened.

It's not that simple, he said. Startled, I asked him to explain. So he did. He drew an analogy between Juliet and Rose (Kate Winslet), the upper-class female protagonist of *Titanic*, in love with working-class Jack (Leonardo di Caprio). He argued that Rose's identity, like Juliet's or Romeo's, could not be separated from their place in society, and that this meant that she could not stop being a Capulet any more than Romeo could not be a Montague: without their names, they would be no-one.

Michael's dazzlingly perceptive intertextual reading made me, as well as his peers, understand Juliet's soliloquy differently – and better. He made me appreciate how Juliet's

attempt to split the signifier and the signified is both heroic and hopeless. I had been Michael's English teacher for the best part of three years. This moment was entirely unprecedented, entirely unpredictable. It exemplifies what Boaler's research showed: mixed attainment groups allow and enable students to flourish because they are not subject to the constraints, the self-confirming prophecies, of the labels that are applied to individual learners when they are grouped according to some notion of ability or prior attainment.

In English, one of the difficulties of grouping by attainment or ability is that such judgements entail, at best, a very rough version of 'best fit'. If the grouping is to be organised according to a measure of prior attainment, which measure is to be taken? Is it a student's performance as a speaker and a listener, a reader and a writer? Even if work in all these language modes is taken into account (and generally speaking, it isn't), a host of other questions arise: performance as a reader or writer of what kind of text, under what circumstances? In my characterisation of Michael, I have emphasised his alienation from school in general. This was true, but I was also painfully aware of how much he hated writing, and of how much this determined Michael's attitude to English as a subject. He arrived at secondary school already convinced that writing was to be avoided. When, very occasionally, he could be prevailed upon to write anything at all, the physical process of forming letters was unbearably arduous for him, and what he produced was an ungainly mess. When I reflect on the *Romeo and Juliet* lesson, it seems obvious to me that one of the conditions for his involvement was that no-one was asking him to write anything. There was, of course, work to be done to persuade Michael that he could be a writer, too. My point here, however, is simply that judging Michael's ability in English on the basis of his prior attainment as a writer – the sort of judgement that is routinely made of students in assigning them to teaching groups – is problematic.

If we go back to the Norwood Report, the assumption that would have been made of Michael, on the basis of his prior attainment (and probably, too, on the basis of his attitude to

schooling, since these criteria are rarely as pure as they might appear), is that abstract thought was not for him, that a curriculum involving engagement with canonical literature was not for him. But look back at the description of those who would benefit from a grammar school education and you will see an outline of what Michael was accomplishing in this moment: an interest in 'causes … on the level of human volition', sensitivity to 'language as an expression of thought', an interest 'in the relatedness of related things.'

Michael didn't walk into the classroom with a well-worked-out theory of class and identity already at his disposal. And the quality of his contribution did not depend on his deft deployment of subject-specific lexis, or even of a formal register of language. What he was also doing – and this is vitally important – was drawing on the resources of knowledge that he already possessed, making a powerful connection between a text he had encountered in the world beyond the classroom (*Titanic*) and the curricularised knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet.*

From birth onwards, learning is an irreducibly social process, in which there is no neat separation of intellect and affect, a process of active meaning-making (Tomasello, 1999; Hobson, 2002). To treat school learning as an entirely different category from learning in the world, and all that we know about it, is wholly unwarrantable. In making this claim, I am attempting neither to deny the usefulness of particular bodies of knowledge and ways of knowing, nor to argue that schooling does not have an important part to play in making these available to young people. What I am suggesting, however, is that learning within the classroom happens most effectively and most powerfully when school students are encouraged to draw on the resources that they already possess, their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 2000).

What I am alluding to here is a body of research and scholarship within a Vygotskian sociocultural tradition.[4] Salient within this work is the emphasis on the social, on learning happening in the interaction between people and on that learning being mediated through culture and history. Learning, in other words, is not something that occurs in isolated individuals. In the way I have told the story, I have attributed the insight to Michael. This is justifiable, in that it was Michael's contribution that provided a moment of illumination, so he deserves credit for it. And yet this is also a crass oversimplification – one that can be traced to our tendency to conceptualise thinking as the property of individual minds, and ability as the property of individual human beings (cf. Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). Michael's idea about Juliet arose in the context of a conversation that involved the whole class (and me). One of the difficulties with the dominant conception of intellectual activity is that it neglects the social dimension of thought – the extent to which, as the psychologist Paul Broks (2003, p. 56) has suggested, 'Minds emerge from process and interaction'.

Vygotsky argued that the relationship between thought and semiotic activity is a complicated one: language enables the development of thought, gives learners access to resources beyond their immediate experience, but the process whereby learners develop a full sense of a word is a lengthy one. To be given a dictionary definition – the meaning – of a word is not enough; learners need time to explore the connotative dimensions that have accreted around the sign as it is used, and has been used, and to fill out for themselves the semiotic potential of that sign (see Gregory, 1996, pp. 16-18). What my students were doing with Juliet's speech contributed to this process. Related to the complexity of the relationship between thought and sign is the process whereby school knowledge – the kind of codified, abstract ways of

[4] Lev Vygotsky's work from the 1920s and early 1930s provides us with a set of insights into learning that are immensely powerful. It is not a coincidence that two of the most influential early advocates for comprehensive education, Brian and Joan Simon, were also among the first to bring Vygotsky's work to the attention of the Anglophone world. See, for example, Vygotsky (1963/1934).

understanding the world that are represented in subject disciplines – is acquired. Vygotsky insisted on the necessity of a dialectical relationship between 'scientific' (that is, disciplinary) and everyday (or spontaneous) concepts: the latter, the concepts that learners bring with them from their lives outside school, are the intellectual resources that enable them to make sense of the scientific concepts that they are presented with in the school curriculum, the ideas that will be reorganized and transformed through the processes of schooling. To suggest that there is a dialectical relationship between everyday and scientific concepts, however, is to make a further claim, namely, that the everyday knowledge that the students bring may also transform and reorganize the curricularised knowledge of schooling. This is, I am suggesting, precisely what was happening when Michael intervened in the *Romeo and Juliet* lesson.

The moment does not, therefore, sit easily with currently fashionable ideas about knowledge and schooling, which tend to favour a model of pedagogy that can best characterised as transmission. In this model, teachers 'deliver' the curriculum to their students; in this model, too, what students know from the world beyond the school is of dubious value in the development of their knowledge and conceptual understanding within the school curriculum. In this version of curriculum and pedagogy, the teacher is the already-knowledgeable one, the students are the empty vessels, waiting to be filled. But if education is conceptualised not as a transmission process but rather as a complex interaction of what students already know, what learning looks like becomes much more complicated.

This is true in all classrooms. What happens in setted or streamed classrooms is that the teacher can operate according to a pretence of uniformity – the uniformity of prior attainment. In a mixed attainment class, on the other hand, the teacher is confronted with the fact of difference. The problem here is that difference can, in a world of big data, be reduced to a single axis of prior attainment. The teacher can ascertain what students already know or

Commented [CD1]: Is pretence it? Is it an illusion of uniformity? Or are you arguing that it IS a pretence because it has been covertly constructed in the ways you explore earlier in the chapter? – a deliberate distortion of what can be understood by 'difference'? 'Prior attainment' that organises learners into different categories does exist (as you say next) – but it's invalid as an indicator of difference? I don't know if this is going anywhere but this term made me stop and puzzle? This runs in the next para – it's a thorny and fascinating part of the chapter.

can do by consulting the data. The next steps – what is to be taught and learnt – then follow inexorably from these data of prior attainment. Learning looks neatly linear. And the teacher operates as if it were so.

This approach is deeply problematic in any subject, not only because prior attainment is an unreliable indicator of future development, but also because disciplinary knowledge is itself more unstable, more contested than this model of transmission would suggest (Yandell, 2017). Within the field of English, this approach involves a fundamental distortion of what the subject is. Michael uses his knowledge of popular, mass culture (*Titanic*) to think about a text he encounters in the classroom (*Romeo and Juliet*). But when we talk about such intertextual reading, it is a mistake to conceptualise what is happening as merely the act of making a connection between two texts. To advance the proposition that Rose is like Juliet involves linking both characters to what Michael knows about the world – the world beyond both texts and beyond the classroom, in which class differences are also salient features of the social landscape.

As the Bullock Report proposed:

> No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1975, p. 286)

School students will, whether one likes it or not, arrive in the classroom with all sorts of other experiences, with histories that will inform their school identities and the sense that they make of school knowledge. They will have particular interests in the knowledge that the school has to offer – and, because they can learn a great deal from each other, they need to be provided with structured opportunities for collaborative learning. And this does mean that

teachers should make it their business to find out about their students and their 'funds of knowledge'. Such local, ethnographic knowledge is, of course, very different from the subject knowledge acquired through a degree course – but it is just as vital an ingredient in teaching. On the pre-service teacher education programme on which I teach, student teachers are introduced to this idea in their first lecture, where it is presented as a question to be addressed throughout the course, and beyond: *Who are the learners and what do they know?*

Difference, representation and English: whose language, whose text, whose reading?

There are good reasons for all teachers to be interested in the languages that their students speak. It was from a Congolese student, with whom I was working in a GCSE Maths class, that I learnt about the difference between the lexis of Belgian French and French French, as it were. Whereas a Parisian would use *soixante-dix*, *quatre-vingts* and *quatre-vingts-dix* for seventy, eighty and ninety, a francophone Congolese would, because of the legacy of Belgian imperialism, say *septante*, *octante* and *nonante*. The difference is of interest within the Maths classroom because the Belgian/Congolese forms are more logical within a decimal counting system: what this opens up is the possibility of students exploring the relationship between arithmetic concepts and the language in which they are expressed. (In English, of course, there is a parallel in the difference between 'eighty' and 'four-score'.)

Students' wider cultural knowledge is an equally vital resource – and often a surprise. When I first started teaching, I was placed in a school where almost all the students were of Bangladeshi heritage. With a class of twelve-year-olds, I developed a scheme of work around oral story-telling. To start things off, I thought I should tell a story. I chose *King Lear*. I had not got much further than 'A long time ago there was a king who had three daughters …' when I had to stop. 'We know this!' the class shouted, as one. 'It's an old Bengali story.'

Graciously, they allowed me to continue, only interrupting occasionally when my version strayed too far from the one with which they were familiar. In recounting this now, I am not suggesting that my twelve-year-olds knew all there was to know about *Lear*; what I would want to argue is that their existing 'funds of knowledge' constituted a resource that enabled them to make meaning out of my (more or less) canonical text. What the anecdote also indicates is that the very fact that Shakespeare plays tend to be tissues of old tales is part of what makes them accessible – and endlessly reworkable.

For teachers within the field of English studies, how difference is conceptualised, how it is constructed and responded to, intersects with long-running debates about the nature of the subject itself. Questions of difference, of identity and affiliation, have most commonly manifested themselves in relation to English in debates about which texts should be read in the classroom. These debates have been valuable, to the extent that they have foregrounded the question of representation. As Robert Scholes has argued:

> Understanding the category of literature as a problem - and a problem with a history - is part of what every serious student of English should know. …
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> The political enters the study of English primarily through questions of representation: who is represented, who does the representing, who is object, who is subject - and how do these representations connect to the values of groups, communities, classes, tribes, sects, and nations? (Scholes, 1998, pp. 151, 153)

These questions are important. They provide a means of interrogating the selection of texts that is a necessary constituent in the process of constructing a curriculum. To ask which texts should be included in the curriculum necessarily entails a consideration of what has been excluded, and what are the criteria. What is central, what is marginal? Who decides? These questions matter at the level of statutorily enforced national curricula; they matter, too, in

relation to the books that are in a departmental stockroom. But text selection is only one element in processes of inclusion and exclusion. What matters more is how these texts are read: whose readings count?

If one takes the view that texts are stable repositories of meaning and that, therefore, the task of the reader is merely to uncover that meaning, then the question of what the reader brings to the text is a trivial one. If, on the other hand, one considers that meanings are made by readers in interaction with text, and that these interactions are shaped by the circumstances in which they happen, then one is more inclined to adopt a contingent theory of meaning, and hence to position school students as agentive, as makers of meaning (as Michael positioned himself), and not merely as recipients of pre-existent, pre-packaged meanings. If students should be encouraged to deploy the full resources of culture and history that they have at their disposal, if textual meaning is construed as irreducibly intertextual, dependent on and arising out of the readers' experience of other texts, then classroom practice might reasonably be expected to include opportunities for more active and collaborative approaches to text. To return again to *Romeo and Juliet*: different students arrive at the play with different understandings of signs such as 'family', 'daughter', 'father', 'love', 'loyalty' – as well as different understandings of signs such as 'knife crime' (Yandell & Brady, 2016). These differences matter in the readings of the text that are accomplished in the classroom. But these differences that students bring with them to the play are also held up to scrutiny subject to reappraisal and contestation. Word meanings evolve there – and this evolution is enabled by the texts that are read together in the dialogic space of the classroom.

I have focused on this question about where and how meaning is made because it seems to me to be a question of fundamental importance to practice in the classroom. For English teachers, this must involve debates about the choice of text and how texts are read, but it must also involve a consideration of students' lives beyond the classroom, of students' cultural

making across an increasingly broad range of modes and media. To do so means taking seriously Raymond Williams' notion of culture as 'a whole way of life' (Williams, 1958), as well as heeding the Bullock Report's advice by finding room within the curriculum for students to draw on and explore the diversity of their engagements in wider cultural activity.

Summary

Processes of schooling tend to suppress some forms of difference among the pupil population, at the same time as constructing and institutionalising others forms of difference. These processes cannot be assumed to be neutral, let alone benign: they need to be interrogated in relation to their exclusionary effects on particular categories of learner. This entails thinking (again) about the rationales for grouping pupils in particular ways; equally vital, however, is to question which forms of knowledge are valorised and which are marginalised.

Questions

- Think about a class that you teach. What do you know about the pupils in this class that is not included in a spreadsheet? How does this knowledge inform your teaching?
- How are pupils grouped in your class, in your department and in your school? Who decides, and what are the rationales for these decisions?

Further reading

- Gifted Phoenix. (2014). The Politics of Setting. Online at: https://giftedphoenix.wordpress.com/2014/11/12/the-politics-of-setting/

This blog provides an excellent, accessible guide to the ways in which government policy on pupil grouping has been enacted in recent decades.

- Hart, S., et al. (eds) (2004) *Learning without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

  The second chapter, in particular, offers the clearest account of the history and impact of ideas about 'ability' on educational practice, particularly in the UK.

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