Investigating literary knowledge in the education of English teachers

Larissa McLean Davies¹, Brenton Doecke², Philip Mead³, Wayne Sawyer⁴

¹University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, ²Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, ³University of Western Australia, Western Australia, Australia, ⁴University of Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

With the advent of the 21st century there has been renewed interest in the relationship between disciplinary fields and school subjects (Green 2010; Yates 2011; Yates & Collins, 2010; Yates, Collins & O'Connor, 2011). Recently, this concern has been brought to attention in Australia through debates about the development of the Australian Curriculum (Atwey & Sing, 2011; Brennan 2011); concerns about student performance in high stakes national testing and comparative international testing (Thomson 2013), and related concerns about teacher quality (Australian Government Department of Education 2014). Central to these debates are tensions about what constitutes discipline knowledge, about pedagogical content knowledge and about curriculum (Cambourne 2013; Shulman 1986). In light of these tensions, this paper analyses data gathered in the context of a broader project concerned with the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and teachers' pedagogical practices in the teaching of secondary English in Australia. Specifically, this paper reports on a comparative analysis of Australian English curriculum and policy documentation concerning the teaching of literature within the suite of 'English subjects', and interviews conducted with pre-service teachers in two Australian States: Victoria and New South Wales, regarding the nature of the literary knowledge they value and bring to the profession. This document and interview data analyses are considered in the context of debates about the teaching of national and world literatures (Casanova, 2004). Analysis of these data will explore the connections and disjunctions between the utopian vision of disciplinary knowledge articulated in sanctioned curriculum documentation and associated official texts, and the understandings of literary knowledge pre-service teachers bring to the profession. In particular, this paper will explore the ways in which literary sociability (Kirkpatrick and Dixon, 2012; McLean Davies, Doecke and Mead, 2013) experienced through previous experiences as students of literature, mediates teachers' understandings of the teaching of texts in English, and impacts on their articulations of a literary education.