# Risky Choices – Autonomy and Surveillance in Secondary English Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

*Achievement data from New Zealand secondary schools suggest that students from lower socio-economic communities have fewer opportunities to engage with complex content in subject English. This article examines this phenomenon by drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality and considers how a context of simultaneously increased autonomy and surveillance may shape curriculum and assessment choices. To explore these ideas, I use interview data from ten secondary English teachers in the wider Auckland region. I complement Foucault's (1982) explanation of governmentality with Ball, Maguire, and Braun's (2012) notion of policy enactment to explore spaces of both compliance and resistance.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the then Minister for Education, the Honourable Hekia Parata, set the target for students gaining NCEA Level 2 at 85% (Ministry of Education, 2013, p.7). Recent Ministry of Education data show that while schools have increased their Level 2 achievement rates, students in lower socio-economic areas are gaining credits in achievement standards that may be less academically demanding and not the standards required for access to university education (Education Review Office, 2019; New Zealand Qualifications and Assessment Authority, 2018). Access to complex content and assessment opportunities, therefore, is inevitably tied to broader issues of equity for students. For Secondary English, data are consistent with cross-curricular results and show that students in low decile schools[1] have less access to challenging content and lower participation rates in complex achievement standards[2] (Wilson et al., 2016). This article examines secondary English teachers' curriculum choices and considers how increased teacher autonomy in the context of increased surveillance may shape these choices.

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[1] In New Zealand, schools are ranked by decile to reflect the socio-economic status of the school community. Decile 10 schools are the most affluent, while decile 1 schools serve the poorest communities.

[2] Achievement standards are the individual assessments that students complete in a given subject.

The conceptual framework for this analysis is drawn from Foucault's work on governmentality and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1979; 1982). A focus on governmentality enables an analysis of how teachers become governable through specific technologies. One such technology is increased responsibility in the context of persistent visibility (Doherty, 2007). My central aim is to explore how these techniques of government become embodied in secondary English classrooms and the extent to which they may shape the learning opportunities available to students. To this end, I examine the interplay between autonomy and surveillance as a means to explain the disparate participation rates in subject English NCEA Achievement Standards between high and low decile schools.

I begin by outlining the ways in which both autonomy and surveillance are prominent features of the education landscape in New Zealand. Next, I elaborate on Foucault and governmentality as a methodological lens to critically examine teachers' choices. The main part of the article is an analysis of interview data with secondary English teachers and critically examination of the role of autonomy and surveillance in shaping content choices. I argue that teachers are simultaneously cast as autonomous professionals *and* intensely scrutinised workers, placing them in a contradictory position that offers both agency and risk; further, that this positioning shapes curriculum decision-making in significant ways, which may contribute to students' exclusion from complex content, particularly in low decile contexts.

## CONTEXTUALISING AUTONOMY AND SURVEILLANCE IN SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

In New Zealand, education policy allows teachers relative autonomy in terms of curriculum design and assessment at all levels, in particular at the senior levels where students engage in external examinations (Ormond, 2018). Schools are encouraged to be responsive to community contexts and needs, allowing teachers to adapt content, or potentially to bypass content altogether. Similarly, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is a standards-based qualification, encompassing a range of discrete achievement standards that teachers are able to package in a variety of ways (Locke, 2008). Both of these policy structures work in mutually reinforcing ways and enable teachers to target and tailor courses for wide-ranging student needs and interests. It is important to note that at the time of writing, a review of the NCEA has taken place and that changes signalled may mitigate against some of these issues.

Research suggests that surveillance affects both curriculum content and assessment in important ways (Au, 2007). For example, in her study of history teachers and the impact of standards-based assessment on history content, Ormond (2017) found that assessment narrowed content significantly and that teachers selected and framed content in order to achieve a seamless fit for externally examined standards. Au (2007) argues that because high stakes testing is often linked to school reputation, curriculum is frequently aligned and restricted to assessment outcomes. In the context of subject English, Holloway and Brass (2017) found that high stakes testing reduces content to definable and measurable outcomes and that it avoids challenging aspects of the subject, such as complex texts and poetry.

This diminished space for complex content (in particular poetry) is explored in Dymoke's (2012) comparative study of secondary English departments in New Zealand and England. She examined the nature of poetry teaching and found that in New Zealand, teacher content choices were frequently constrained by the type of assessment in place. One particular Achievement Standard *Respond to Unfamiliar Texts* was avoided on the basis of complexity of texts that students had not previously encountered in class. Her study suggests that risk and anxiety over results can be significant drivers of teachers' curriculum decision-making.

Teacher autonomy, then, sits alongside increased teacher scrutiny. This scrutiny is connected to discourses that constitute teachers as important determiners of student achievement to the extent that a major focus of current educational research attempts to capture best practice and value-added models (Amrein-Beardsley, 2014). As a result, much of the policy language emerging from this focus encompasses a zero-excuses discourse in which explanations that locate underachievement in broader societal structures are actively silenced (Thrupp, 2014). This discourse produces a thorny paradox for teachers. On the one hand, teacher practice is the most evidence-based and researched informed it has ever been; on the other, the unchallenged faith in best practice and the belief it is possible to get it right has opened up teacher practice to intense scrutiny. Perhaps more concerning, these discourses underscore a festering suspicion about teacher quality, what Ball refers to as "discourses of derision" (1990, p. 7).

Curriculum autonomy constitutes teachers as curriculum authors who produce curricula to best meet the needs and interests of their students. At the same time, discourses that constitute teachers as determiners of student success actively construct teachers as needing to be monitored and accountable for the results they produce. This context offers teachers a constrained, risky autonomy. It creates an environment where there is relative autonomy to make curriculum and assessment decisions *in the context* of increased measuring and reporting of student outcomes.

**THE STUDY**

The aim of this study was to explore the interplay between autonomy and surveillance and its possible effects on content and assessment choices. Heads of Departments (HoDs) from Secondary English teachers across Auckland, New Zealand, were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview, because of the perspective they provide in relation to autonomy and surveillance. As HoDs, they not only play an active role in shaping departmental schemes but are also more likely to be concerned about achievement outcomes and departmental statistics.

A sample size of ten teachers (see Table 1) was chosen in order to cover a broad range of schooling contexts and the schools used in this article range from Decile 1 to Decile 10. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow for focused but open discussion around curriculum autonomy and accountability.

**Table 1:** Teachers and schools involved in the study.

| Head of Department | School Context | School Decile |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher A (Susan[3]) | An integrated Catholic school | 10 |
| Teacher B (Filipo) | A coeducational state school | 1 |
| Teacher C (Rachael) | A coeducational state school | 2 |
| Teacher D (Mary) | A coeducational state school | 9 |
| Teacher E (Eseta) | A coeducational state school | 1 |
| Teacher F (Rob) | A coeducational state school | 8 |
| Teacher G (Helen) | A single-sex girls' state school | 3 |
| Teacher H (James) | A coeducational state school | 1 |
| Teacher I (Mike) | A coeducational state school | 2 |
| Teacher J (Rose) | A coeducational state school | 4 |

I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in relation to autonomy and surveillance, as well as for an in-depth interpretation of a specific context in secondary English teaching. I read the transcripts, looking for possible connections between surveillance techniques and how teachers made content choices. On a second reading, I looked at possible sites of resistance, where teachers either accommodated or resisted normalising practices. Both my first and second readings of the interview data are consistent with a Foucauldian lens in which it is assumed that both possibilities and constraints are possible within any discursive field.

**Theoretical framework and conceptual tools**

Foucauldian concepts allow a rich analysis of the interplay between larger education structures and the details of classroom life (Janks, 2010). Consequently, a range of education policy analyses have drawn on Foucault to theorise the effects of neoliberal policies on teachers' work (Olssen et al., 2004). In particular, there has been a focus on how teachers are rendered governable, aligning their own goals with policy pursuits and outcomes, including any inherent ethics and values (Ball, 1993, 2003; Perryman et al., 2011). Foucault's explanation of power as working upon action and that can only be exercised on free people (1982) opens up possibilities for analysis that make visible how teachers may participate in self-regulating behaviours. Significantly for this study, this view of power also opens up possibilities for resistance to normative discourses and practices.

Foucault's concept of governmentality refers to the techniques developed to control, shape, and normalise people's behaviour (Foucault, 1979; Rabinow & Rose, 2003). As a methodological tool, governmentality draws attention to the practice of government and the attitudes required to sustain these practices (Foucault, 1979; Fimyar, 2008). Autonomy, in a Foucauldian sense, is the freedom to act upon oneself to the subjectivities available. For this reason,

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[3] All teacher names are pseudonyms.

Foucault (1982) argues that analyses should focus on the subject rather than power, focussing our attention on the ways subjectivities (and corresponding practices) are constituted and governed. In the context of this study, a Foucauldian analysis is not concerned with particular curriculum or assessment policies but with how these structures shape how teachers conduct themselves. Importantly, conduct is not predetermined; rather, teachers are faced with "a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realised" (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). Governmentality, then, is a valuable way of conceptualising teacher decision-making because it locates choices at a broader discursive level and illuminates the possible spaces for action in which versions of secondary English are rendered possible.

   To further unravel the interplay between autonomy and surveillance, I draw on Braun et al. (2011) and their notion of policy enactment to examine the ways in which teachers may mediate either national or school policy in their classrooms. Braun et al. (2011) draw a distinction between policy implementation and policy enactment. While policy implementation assumes an uncontested and uni-directional relationship between policy and teacher practice, the authors argue that policy enactment actually "involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualization" (p. 3). They argue that policy analyses that focus on implementation do not acknowledge the many different contexts that occur within schools. Indeed, these studies, which the authors describe as "overbearingly rational and emotionless" (p. 5), remove the more nuanced and human aspects of how life plays out in schools. In place of policy implementation, policy enactment imbues both interpretation and translation as important aspects of how policy becomes practice. As Ball has previously argued, "policies … create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed, or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set" (Ball, 1994, p. 19). In other words – the space between policy and practice is always contested terrain.

   Ball et al. (2012) point to situated contexts, professional cultures, material contexts, and external contexts as significant mediators in how policy is enacted in schools. They argue schools are not simple or coherent entities and that within any school there will be competing narratives about teaching, learning, and curriculum. By paying attention to interpretation and translation, the tensions teachers negotiate are made visible, including how they actively contest policy, shaping and reshaping secondary English in their classrooms.

   Surveillance is a performance technology, which Ball et al. (2012) refer to as *compulsory visibility*. Although this normalising and inescapable gaze may be externally imposed, it leads to internal self-regulating behaviours. In the following section, I discuss key findings from the participant study informed by the conceptual tools outlined above. In particular, I examine the ways in which compulsory visibility manifests itself as intensified scrutiny of student outcomes and/or departmental statistics (Perryman et al., 2011).

**Examining the interplay between autonomy and surveillance and its effects on secondary English content**

   The teachers in this study consistently pointed to the ways in which compulsory visibility impacted their sense of themselves as English teachers. Three interrelated themes emerged from the interviews: a sense of alienation

and feeling that they were "not really being English teachers", the high personal cost of accountability measures, and the ways in which their identity as English teachers was shaped by the use of departmental statistics. In spite of this pressure, teachers also reported small sites of resistance, demonstrating an openness to uncertainty by resisting the audit culture emphasis on predetermined and knowable outcomes. I detail each of these four themes in the section that follows.

*Alienation*

Teachers' sense of themselves as English teachers was strongly tied to the content they offered in their classrooms. In the frequent instances of having to curtail content in order to ensure better outcomes, teachers tended to comment on how this made them feel less like English teachers. Filipo, for example, noted the effect of measures taken to ensure better results in the department. He described this estrangement as *"not being true to ourselves as English teachers"*, stating that, *"[I] almost left because I felt like I was not teaching. It [wasn't] literature".* He explained that other staff in his department expressed similar concerns and how they felt they were *"a subject more like employment…like tick the boxes and follow this thing".* He commented that during that particular year he did not teach any extended texts and that this felt like a *"dead year"* to him. He also pointed to the irony that while this was a *"depressing year"* for him, it was also *"the best year for [the department's] results."*

For another teacher, the pressure from both the school and students to ensure credits meant that some English courses felt diminished and lacking in coherence. Susan noted that *"it was very much 'now we're doing a form filling unit, now we're doing a speech unit' and nothing really hung together."* The teacher also commented that this narrow focus on achievable assessment meant that students accumulated credits without really developing the capacities required for more complex work the following year: *"the students see it very much as credit-driven and it's hard to motivate them to actually gain skills because they [want to know] how many credits is this worth and, what do I have to do to get credits?"*

Significantly, the pressure extended beyond everyday teaching into their sense of themselves as English teachers. The dissonance between what the teachers imagined their job as English teachers (that they would stir a love for literature and poetry in their students) and what they actually ended up teaching throws light on the deeper existential nature of their struggle. Similarly, externally imposed targets meant that teachers also experienced a sense of diminished autonomy in their own planning and teaching.

*Personal Cost*

The sense of alienation that teachers felt meant they often tried different ways of bringing literature back into courses. This was never straightforward, however, and involved a personal cost, my findings showing that teachers reported high levels of stress associated with anxiety, guilt, and shame. Susan, for example, acknowledged that there was a level of risk in teaching a more traditional course, making life more difficult: *"[I] might be pulling my hair out by the end of Term Two [asking] why couldn't I have been filling in a form?"* Moreover, she talked about the ways in which she would need to *"sell"* a

literature-focused course to her principal in order to convince him to accept something that went against current practice. For Filipo, the stress of negotiating the pressure from senior management to produce good results and his own commitments to English proved too much: *"It was a very challenging time and I think that's why I could only last three years".* These findings are echoed by Ball (2003), who argues that performativity produces feelings of alienation, inauthenticity, meaninglessness and leaves minimal time to reflect.

*Departmental Statistics*

Finally, the possibility of exposing oneself as Head of Department and as an English department by way of potentially damning statistics was an ever-present concern for the teachers. Mirroring the narratives presented by Perryman et al. (2011), there was an equally strong sense that English departments were more examined than others. Statistics become a marker of identity within the school and for teachers. As exemplified by Filipo, they produced an alienating identity that stripped pleasure from teaching:

> *Everyone knows your stats. Everyone knows the Year 11 literacy stats. No-one knows Year 11 drama stats or science stats, but they know maths and English. And they know your [University Entrance] stats as well. And management ask you why [the results are what they are] and it's compared year to year. Stats are central in how you are seen. You always have to have a stat in your head. You have to make stats a focus and you have to find ways to increase the stats and talk about the stats and I started to not really enjoy that, not at all.*

For secondary English teachers, the pressure to perform is often intensified compared with other departments in schools. Literacy credits, for example, which are needed to gain school qualifications as well as for university entrance, are often generated in English courses. As a result, the hunt for literacy credits can place an inordinate burden on English departments and/or encourage departments to be results-driven (Perryman et al., 2011).

Surveillance through departmental statistics is an example of how Foucault sees power operationalised through technologies of the self (Besley, 2007). These surveillance measures are internalised so that teachers learn to discipline themselves in relation to desired outcomes. The good teacher produces outcomes and ensures that everyone is gaining some level of qualification, no matter how thin that qualification may be. The dominance of these statistics on English teachers' lives are illustrative of Foucault's argument that power is exercised from the bottom up, working through particular technologies and becoming integrated into everyday practices. As Robertson (2016) points out, surveillance becomes a way of governing teachers' work from a distance through an audit culture.

Ball (2003) maintains that autonomy and surveillance work together, inviting teachers to see themselves as good teachers or as needing improvement. Davies and Bansell (2007) suggest a further effect is to constitute teachers as "responsibilised subjects" (p. 248) who need to work on themselves in order to produce results. This state of perpetual measurement means that teacher autonomy is always governed by targets and comparisons. In this

study, when teachers resisted the push for diminished courses, it inevitably contained an element of risk. Teachers had to mediate personal risk against student risk. That is, the more teachers resisted certain types of English courses, the more likely they were to risk things like poor departmental statistics. Conversely, if they accepted these types of courses, teachers felt they were risking student opportunities to engage with English in ways that were more complex and enabling for students in the long run.

*Resistance*

While compulsory visibility can govern teacher behaviour in oppressive ways, that is not to say that teachers do not engage in small acts of powerful resistance. Ball (1994) refers to these spaces as "creative non-implementation" (p. 20). This notion of creative resistance is aligned to Foucault's argument that power can only be exercised on free individuals. The teachers generally demonstrated an astute understanding of the discursive field in which their work took place. The persistence and prominence of achievement results were perceptively understood as, "*the kind of philosophy a lot of schools have because they're worried about what their results look like*" (Mary). Insights were also evidence of the contradictions they often experienced in their work. Rose, for example, pointed to what she called the "*paradox*" between fostering critical understanding and providing the content for students to pass, stating that: "*in order for them to learn what they need to pass, you've actually got to shut down some of their critical thinking*". Moreover, this teacher also pointed out that it is "*the constant grind*" of assessment and accountability that stands in the way of reflecting purposefully about these contradictions. One way to interpret this teacher's comments is to see them as a rejection of performativity whereby measurement and results become the way of defining what counts in school settings. As Holloway and Brass (2017) put it, performance measures become a way in which "teachers legitimise their classroom decisions" (p. 377).

> *I think most teachers are very aware of [the pressure to deliver results] when they have time to stop and think [but] 'I've got to do this marking and I've got to show them what they do to take the next step', you actually forget it. Until you get that kid [sic] asking those questions and you catch yourself shutting them down and go yeah, I don't want to do that, I don't want to be that sort of teacher. We want everyone in the class to achieve but it is in total tension with the bigger stuff.* (Rose)

While these responses demonstrate the critical stance of teachers in relation to school demands, the participant teachers also discussed how they constantly deal with pressures from a range of sources. Two teachers, each from a Decile 1 school, spoke at length about actively resisting the accountability culture and its effects in narrowing curriculum content for their students. This resistance was required across a number of fronts that were both internal and external to their schools. In one case, Eseta spoke about an external reviewer brought into the department to review their English programme. The reviewer suggested that students at this school should abandon Shakespeare and instead focus on texts that were simpler and more appealing to the student population – magazines were suggested as a better

alternative. Another result of this review was to abandon external assessments that year (the NCEA is made up of both internal and external assessments and schools can forego external assessments if they wish). She noted they tried one year without externals and that everyone followed the same plan, which was, as the reviewer recommended, magazine based. It was the year, as this teacher remembers it, that *"literature died".* She also noted, however, that in her class, students would read a novel and a play, even though the assessments were organised around short texts in magazines.

> *We tried one year without externals and everyone did the same thing [but] I just did my own thing. I got my kids [sic], and I said 'No, you've got to read a novel, you've got to read a play', everyone else had magazines, mainly short stories, no extended texts, nothing challenging.* (Eseta)

James described the ongoing pressure to conform, structure programmes, and deal with students in ways that were in keeping with external demands. He cited the Education Review Office (ERO)[4], the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)[5], and senior management within his school as points of tension between his own willingness to be open to uncertainty and the far more rigid external demands. He explained that sometimes senior management would respond to NZQA when they elected not to withdraw students from external assessments. He was also aware of the actions of senior management could *"frustrate the Ministry"* (of Education) and *"frustrate ERO"*, these examples being illustrative of policy enactment and a curriculum space that is neither fully agentic nor fully determined.

**The (riskier) impact of surveillance on low decile schools**

I now turn to school contexts and how the interplay between autonomy and surveillance may play out in low decile schools. Thrupp (1995, 1999, 2007) has repeatedly called for a recognition of school effects and "school mix" in examining school performance (1995, p. 182). Importantly, he distinguishes between school-based and school-caused reasons for underachievement. Thrupp and Lupton (2006) also call for a less neutral school discourse that takes schooling contexts seriously, arguing that even among low decile schools there is a variance in contextual challenges. The need for a less neutral discourse of schooling is important in a contemporary landscape that overemphasises school effectiveness and improvement research as a way of fixing low performing schools. As Thrupp and Lupton (2006) point out, "[b]y treating all schools as being the same and thus capable of achieving the same, they render unimportant, perhaps even invisible, the social and economic inequalities that really prevent some students from doing as well as others" (p. 312).

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[4] The Education Review Office (ERO) is the governing body for 'quality assurance' in New Zealand schools.
5 The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is the NZ government body that provides leadership in assessment and qualifications.

Thrupp and Lupton's argument draws attention to the intricate nature of policy enactment in low decile contexts. The more exposed (and riskier) nature of teaching at a Decile 1 school is evident in the contrasting English courses offered at a Decile 10 and Decile 1 school. The Head of Department of a Decile 10 school talked about how her department differentiated content and assessment according to student need and ability. Students for whom English was a second language, for example, were provided English courses that allowed them to develop their literacy rather than their literary capacities. Although the HoD expressed an awareness of the limits to differentiating content this way, separate courses were nevertheless enacted with little risk to the school. In differentiating courses, departmental results were optimised, and the school maintained its high performing position. The Head of Department in a Decile 1 school, on the other hand, chose not to differentiate (despite school policy) and consequently opened both the department and the school to potentially shakier statistics.

James, a HoD in a Decile 1 school recounted the pressures on his department to produce results. He began by discussing the context of his school community in which they experience high rates of truancy (around 30%), which means that a number of students do not turn up to external exams. The teacher then discussed how the school removes students from external assessments when their attendance drops below 80 percent. The excerpt below sharply illustrates both the complex pressure experienced in low decile schools as well how teachers may resist official practices:

> *The alternative is that we would present every kid [sic], we would lock them into a course at the beginning of the year and we'd say that's what you're doing and there's no changes. And if you drop below 80 percent attendance, we automatically withdraw you from exams. [Yet] only three years ago I had a girl who I would have sworn black and blue at this time of the year that she would not have got her Level One Literacy but, you know, bugger it, she passed one thing during the year and she passed the unfamiliar text and one essay and she got it. If I had withdrawn her then that girl wouldn't have got her Level One Certificate, so what do you do? Well, I'd rather have kids [sic] go through. (James)*

The choices this teacher makes contain an element of risk yet despite the threat of poor statistics and pressure from management, he made choices that were consistent with his broader ethical commitments to education and to his students. He noted the ethically questionable practice of removing students from courses if their attendance dropped and chose instead to ignore the mandate and give the student with intermittent attendance the opportunity of completing the Level 1 Certificate.

The risk involved in making content and assessment choices is a function of the discursive focus on achievement for all students. Policies of achievement place the responsibility for achievement with schools, particularly for those groups of students who underperform. This achievement narrative is difficult to argue against. Who would be against the idea of achievement for all? The normative quality of this discourse, however, is worrisome for teachers because it locates them as part of a much deeper problem. Thrupp (2014)

discusses the shift in what presently counts as deficit thinking in educational contexts. Referring to current policy discourse, he demonstrates how there is no longer a distinction between structural explanations for student underachievement and victim-blaming stances. Instead, he argues, *any* explanation is rendered a deficit response which should be eliminated from educational speak.

This is a critical observation and an important contribution to any examination of secondary English teachers' work. Not only are teachers blamed, but any engagement with structural inequality is silenced (Weber, 2007). Discourses of achievement and blame, therefore, normalise the idea that teachers require more surveillance. This increased surveillance goes hand in hand with managerialist discourses about teachers' work (Connell, 2009; 2015). Despite the professed neoliberal imperative on self-management and freedom from the state, teachers and schools are actually more constrained and governed under these forms of public management. Furthermore, as Biesta (2004) argues, this technical-managerial approach to accountability is difficult to reconcile with a view of teaching that places a social justice ethic at its centre. The example of the teacher who refuses to withdraw a student from an external exam demonstrates this particular tension and suggests a bigger risk to low decile schools.

**Risky choices in secondary English classrooms**

The data from the interviews suggest that English teachers currently experience a constrained autonomy that holds both agency and risk. The data also indicates that this risk may be greater for low decile schools. This autonomy manifests itself as a potentially dangerous autonomy due to the highly scrutinised and public nature of departmental results. As Au (2007) points out, it is these sorts of results that are used to name underperforming schools and teachers. The teachers in this study consistently pointed to the stress and anxiety related to making curriculum and assessment decisions. Words such as *"depressing"* and *"disheartening"* came up repeatedly in the interviews and were regularly linked to a sense of alienation from teachers' sense of themselves as English teachers. The perpetual and potentially damning gaze of departmental statistics meant that teachers were always negotiating tensions between a range of competing demands.

Despite these negotiations, the data also show that teachers may resist normative discourses and normalising practices. Teachers showed they were able to see through these discourses and identify the broader performative and competitive landscape in which they are located, as expressed by Mary when she noted that the push for achievement results were part of the school's philosophy. Moreover, teachers were also able to act in ways that intervene and disrupt expected norms and behaviours. The interview data suggest that risk is a significant element in curriculum decision-making in which teachers negotiate risk to themselves (in the form of outcomes and departmental statistics) and risk to students (in the form of access to content and qualifications).

Notably, the use of governmentality as an analytical tool reveals that teacher experiences must remain a central focus of analysis in curriculum decision-making. Secondary English teachers negotiate a risky tightrope between competing demands. Any discussion about curriculum choices must

recognise that these choices are deeply embedded in teachers' own grappling with these exigencies.

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