

What is the Place for Shakespeare in Today's Alberta English Language  
Arts Curriculum?

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

Department of Secondary Education  
University of Alberta

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## **Abstract**

Since the establishment of the Alberta High School English Language Arts Program of Studies, the genre of the Shakespearean drama has always been a required component in the curriculum document. In addition, English 30-1 students must complete a series of reading comprehension questions on a Shakespearean passage, as part of a standardized diploma exam.

As a graduate of the Alberta High School Diploma Program, and now a teacher of the English Language Arts High School Program of Studies, I was intrigued by the impact Shakespeare had in Language Arts curriculum, education and pedagogy. As an educator, I have witnessed many students struggle with understanding the language of Shakespeare and the context of his works, as well as students who found the study of Shakespeare to be the most intriguing and rewarding part of their high school English journey. As the only required author in the current Alberta Program of Studies, I found myself asking how such works from so long ago could be relevant to our changing classroom demographic and promotion of multi-literacies in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. However, I am neither arguing for nor against the teaching of Shakespeare's plays altogether, but have explored whether English teachers in Alberta agree that he should be the only required author in the curriculum. Through their responses, I attempted to determine to what extent the rationale for teaching Shakespeare was still consistent, and if given the option, what the high school English Language Arts educators would opt to teach in lieu of Shakespeare.

Based on the responses of my teacher participants, it is clear that they would continue to teach Shakespeare even if his works were no longer mandatory in the curriculum. They also recognize that an educator should have valid reasons for selecting his plays, as they do other works, rather than simply adhering to mandates.

## Preface

### My Sonnet to Shakespeare

To teach or not to teach the ven'erable Bard  
Whose stunning verse is still continually quoted?  
Of timeless themes of sorrow and love marred,  
Soliloquies and scenes are to be noted.  
But aren't there others who can shed some light?  
Beyond *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Romeo*...  
It's time to challenge all the canon's might!  
Do we teach texts we were taught long ago?  
Old Shakespeare is still very much alive:  
Translated and adapted, re-created –  
Each character on stage is fresh revived;  
In school, his language clearly explicated.  
And yet, there's *method to the madness* still:  
To mirror human foibles with such skill.

***Dedicated to...***

*My dad, Tony, for teaching me the importance of becoming a life-long learner;*

*My mom, Wan, for teaching me compassion and strength;*

*My sister, Kim, for teaching me the power of resilience.*

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the following individuals for all of their guidance during this challenging, but riveting journey:

Dr. Ingrid Johnston, my supervisor, for all of her kindness, patience, and support. Thank you for continuing to believe in me, even when I encountered moments of doubt.

Dr. Marg Iveson and Dr. Lynne Wiltse for their feedback, thought-provoking questions, and interest in my research.

My brilliant colleagues, Lindsay Carmichael, Carl Irwin, Chris McNeill, and Kathy Schock, for their constant friendship, and pedagogical insights.

All my amazing interview participants – without your time and dedication, this study would not have been possible.

My Family: Mom, Dad, Kim, and Bert!

My students, who inspire me each and every day...

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## **Chapter One: Introduction and Purpose of Research**

Over the past decade, I have worked as a high school English Language Arts teacher in Western Canada. The school context in which I teach stems from a long tradition of academics and athletics, and consists of a variety of specialized programs such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, French Immersion, Work Experience and Registered Apprenticeship Program, Interactions Program, English Language Learners (ELL) Courses for English Second Language (ESL) and International Students, just to name a few. In addition to their classes, many of the students also participate in extra-curricular activities and contribute to their respective communities. Over 90% of the grade 12 graduates, from this very multi-culturally populated school, go on to post-secondary programs, and as a result, teachers must work closely with the Alberta Program of Studies and examine the specific needs of their diverse population of students in order to yield a higher probability of success. Teachers are constantly pressured into preparing their students for high stakes tests, the diploma exams in this case, as successful course completion determines the funding for many of the schools' budgets.

What I find unique about teaching English Language Arts is how its very framework is divided into skills rather than specific concepts (Alberta Education, 2003). Students are taught various strategies to read texts and respond to them: "text study" and "text creation" (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 10-11). The "text study" portion is broken down into different genres and it is the responsibility of the teacher (or maybe even a teacher-student agreement) to decide the titles of the texts being taught. However, despite this flexibility, one of the genre categories specifies that a



Shakespearean drama must be taught. It is in fact a required component at the *English Language Arts 20-1 and 30-1* level (students who are taking Grade 11 and 12 English) and “students who graduate from the academic stream write a standardized multiple choice reading comprehension test, featuring discrete questions on excerpts from Shakespearean works” (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2016, p. 335). As for many other curriculum documents throughout the world, Shakespeare appears time and time again, even though millions of authors and texts have been published since his time, and some argue that “Shakespeare should remain on the list because it always has been on the list” (Fenwick & Parsons, 1996, p. 22). In my research, I addressed whether and why Shakespeare, taught for 70 years in Alberta, should still remain as the only required author in the Alberta English Language Arts 20-1 and 30-1 Program of Study. Many teachers still believe that Shakespeare is the most well-known English author in history, that he revolutionized the English language, and that he was the most adapted author in the world: his plays, written hundreds of years ago, contained many universal themes that are still relevant today. My purpose for this research was to see whether the works of Shakespeare were still considered to be relevant to the multicultural dynamics of the classroom and the expansion of multimodal texts and literacies.

## Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

### Theoretical Frameworks:

#### 1. Foucault's *Panopticon* and Surveillance

The first theoretical approach to my research was examining Foucault's Theory of the Panopticon from his work *Discipline and Punish* (1995). As professionals, teachers are expected to adhere to curriculum competencies and standards set by the Alberta Ministry of Education. In order to ensure that teachers are accountable to provincial standards at the high school level, each teacher is given a detailed report of their students' results and achievement on the diploma examination. As suggested by Foucault (1995), "this surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor" (p. 196).

Statistics, including the percentage of students that meet the acceptable standard (scoring a minimum of 50% on the exam) and those who reach the standard of excellence (scoring a minimum of 80% on the exam), are listed along with the provincial averages and compared directly to the teacher-awarded mark for each student. In Alberta, a grade twelve student's final grade is composed of a blended score: their school awarded mark (worth 70% of the final grade) and the diploma examination (worth 30% of the final grade). Naturally, many teachers are aware that their school administration would be keeping close attention to the significant discrepancies between these two numbers and might organize their course in hopes to keep this gap minimal. Similar to the idea of the Panopticon, "for what matters [is] that [the teacher] knows

himself to be observed” (Foucault, 1995, p. 201), and begins to adjust his (or her) pedagogy when reflecting on these results.

However, unlike other core subject areas, in which the concepts from each unit are tested on the diploma exams, the English Language Arts diploma cannot logistically assess every general outcome, such as General Outcome 5: “to respect, support and collaborate with others” (Alberta Education, 2003, p.8), a skill that is often assessed in group presentations during class time. In regards to topic of text selection, I wondered to what extent teachers chose more traditional pieces to cater towards a student’s success on the diploma exam. Many students still choose to write on similar texts that were taught at least two decades ago. If the literary focus is placed more heavily on the canon, then introducing more modern, multi-cultural texts is less likely. Foucault (1995) argues how “the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 201), which ironically instills a sense of fear in teachers – preventing them from taking risks or exposing students to alternative perspectives in literature. I also questioned to what extent teachers framed their language arts courses mainly around the curricular outcomes assessed on the diploma exam or whether they emphasized each outcome equally. This idea of surveillance from both the Ministry of Education, school board, and school administration perhaps can prevent certain teachers from questioning required authors and diverging from lists of recommended literature in the program of study. Besides teaching a Shakespearean play, English Language Arts teachers have the ability to choose a variety of texts from a variety of genres, but many revert to what has been traditionally taught in the school or what they have learned in school themselves.

## 2. Postcolonial Theory

I also chose to frame my research through a postcolonial lens. McLeod (2010) argues that “Education is arguably a crucial ideological apparatus of the state by which certain values are asserted as the best and most true” (p.163), and I considered whether the repetition of teaching the Shakespeare play in High School English Language Arts – as a majority of students study up to three plays – would further convince them of his legitimacy and importance over other authors. If so, this act continues to support the idea that “Colonialism uses educational institutions to augment the perceived legitimacy and propriety of itself, as well as providing the means by which colonial power can be maintained” (McLeod, 2010, p. 163).

Similar to the works of Shakespeare, many of the recommended High School English Language Arts literature lists consist of predominantly Caucasian – British, American, and Canadian – authors, even though multiculturalism is celebrated in these nations. Young (2003) thus notes, “most of the writing that has dominated what the world calls knowledge has been produced by people living in western countries in the past three or more centuries, and it is this kind of knowledge that is elaborated and sanctioned by the academy, the institutional knowledge corporation” (p. 18). If teachers believe that it is imperative for students to empathize with people of different cultures and viewpoints, and question the grand narrative of dominant perspectives, then the choice of literature in the classroom should be reflected as such.

With schools of a high percentage of immigrants and first-generation students, I wondered whether many of them were able to relate to the cultural and religious references found in the works of Shakespeare – as many do not consider themselves to

be Christian or the English language to be their mother tongue. Would they feel excluded by their peers? Would this contribute to their feelings of *otherness*? Although there might be a “broad consensus, [that] the dominance of the western culture...has been dissolved into a more generous system of cultural respect and a tolerance for differences” (Young, 2003, p.4), teachers need to ensure that their students do not ironically reassert cultural stereotypes. According to Young (2003), “postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and politics in which your interests come first, not last” (p.2).

## **Related Literature**

In this literature review, I will draw from the changes and revisions from the Alberta English Language Arts Program of Studies over the last five decades, as well as use curriculum documents from other countries in comparison. I will examine the history of the English curriculum and why Shakespeare was placed in the literary canon in the first place. I will also discuss the ongoing debate between scholars who believe that Shakespeare must continue to be taught and those who oppose this notion. Finally, I will refer to research methods and case studies that have been done to re-assert this ongoing debate and make recommendations as to how my personal research expands on what has already been done.

### **1. Alberta ELA Program of Studies and International Curriculum**

As the requirements of other genre studies have changed drastically over the years to become less prescriptive and more flexible (Alberta Education, 1961, 1975, 1990), the Shakespearean drama section has changed very little. In 1961, English Literature 20 had a choice of three plays (*Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, or *Richard II*)

and English Literature 30 had a choice of two plays (*Macbeth* or *Hamlet*). It is very clear that the focus at the time was the Shakespearean tragedy, as three of the five plays followed this structure. However, even now, the most popular Shakespearean play taught in English 20-1 (the advanced level course) is *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* for English 30-1 (Ourdeva-Balinska, 2016). This rather prescriptive approach did not change until the 1990 Program of Studies, in which specific lists of plays were replaced by just the phrase “Shakespearean Drama,” allowing the teachers to choose any of the plays written by the well-known Bard. The Shakespearean Drama is also a recommended component at the English 10-1 level, and according to the study conducted by Altmann, Johnston & Mackey (1998), many teachers still choose to teach Shakespeare to prepare students for their higher level English courses. Many also feel that because the diploma exam (at the end of English 30-1) asks students to answer a set of reading comprehension questions in response to a Shakespearean passage, that it is necessary to add an additional year of its study. This is the only portion of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam that makes educators accountable for teaching the Shakespearean play in Alberta, and its results are heavily analyzed both by individual school districts and Alberta Education. In contrast, for genres such as poetry, Alberta Education eliminated their lists of specific poets and replaced them with the phrase “a variety of poetry required” (2003, p.10) instead. This change empowered the English Language Arts teachers, as they were able to select works based on the interests of their students and specific issues that they wanted to raise in class.

In the United Kingdom, “Shakespeare is considered so important by so many people... that he is the only compulsory author on the [2013 English] National

Curriculum and the only author by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in their A-level guidelines” (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 63). He is also required in similar high school English programs in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Houlahan, 2002; Ward & Connolly, 2008; Breitsprecher, 2009). However, in the last three years, “places as diverse as New Zealand and Texas have deemed Shakespeare ‘too difficult’ for most students and eliminated or greatly reduced the teaching of his works” (Breitsprecher, 2009, p.51). In fact, a section of the New Zealand Bursary exam (as cited in Houlahan, 2002), in which students are asked to write a critical response on a Shakespearean passage, was phased out by the spring of 2012. According to Breitsprecher (2009), many school districts in the United States are also beginning to follow this similar line of thinking, especially after the implementation of the “No Child Left Behind” policy by the Bush administration. If Shakespeare is gradually being taken off the required reading lists of many countries with high immigration and multiculturalism, it is important to ask whether he is still relevant to Canadian society.

## **2. The History of English and Shakespeare in the Literary Canon**

In order to understand why Shakespeare has become such a dominant force in the English curriculum, it is important to discuss the rationale behind having an English curriculum. In his text, *Doing English*, Eaglestone (2000) discusses how the subject of English was created largely due to colonialism. When Britain colonized India and formed the East India Company, the British parliament wanted the East India Company to educate the Indian people (Loomba & Orkin 1988; Eaglestone 2000; Ward & Connolly, 2008), and “the literature of England was seen as a *mould* of the English way of life, morals, taste and the English way of doing things” (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 11). This

is why the subject is known presently as English rather than Literature for it signifies the culture that is preserved through the texts being studied. “English” in India was used to represent a way to become “civilized” and suppress the ability to question the regime in place.

The East India Company’s rationale was then carried over to Britain and English did not become an academic subject until after the First World War (Eaglestone, 2000). Only those who studied the classics, which of course were in Latin or Greek, were considered civilized. However, due to the increased poverty rates and illiteracy caused by the war, Latin and Greek were too far out of reach from the majority of the British population, “English was at best an imitation of the classics and at worse only a mildly pleasant diversion...for second- or third-rate minds” (Eaglestone, 2000, p.10). Prior to the 1920s, many English students might only have encountered a Shakespearean play once in their literature studies in their entire grade school education, but the Newbolt Report (1921), a compilation of pedagogical recommendations commissioned by the British government, emphasized the importance of including the works of Shakespeare in the curriculum (Blockside, 2005). As cited by Blockside (2005), the Newbolt Report stated that “Shakespeare is an inevitable and necessary part of school activity because he is...our greatest English writer” (p. 5).

The first official English curriculum documents were devised by educators, F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, between 1932 to 1948, who created a list of texts that best represented British nationalism, culture and values, as they argued that “only literature, and the rigorous study of literature could remind us of our human values and of what was truly important” (as cited in Eaglestone, 2000, p. 15). William Shakespeare was one



of the authors listed by the Leavises to be read and taught. The fact that they were the ones to compile this list of authors (or literary canon) already implies that they come from a position of privilege, valuing a few individuals' opinions over others (Loomba & Orkin, 1998; Ward & Connolly, 2008). As teachers, the Leavises passed down their 'Leavis method' of a prescriptive list of literature onto their student teachers, who continued the same tradition with their students and so forth (Eaglestone, 2000). By 1990, "Shakespeare was the only author compulsorily prescribed for study by all the nation's children" (Blocksidge, 2005, p. 2) when the National Curriculum in English was published, suggesting (as cited by Blocksidge) that "Many teachers believe that Shakespeare's work conveys universal values, and that his language expresses rich and subtle meanings beyond that of any other English writer" (p. 13). However, teachers at the same time also encouraged students to explore "critically about his status in the canon" (p.13).

When the British curriculum was under review in 1991, the Cox Report (as cited in Ward & Connolly, 2008), examined the tensions between building a new curriculum of progress and "providing educational developments that build on the best of the past" (p. 294). The members of the English National Curriculum Committee did not want to necessarily do away with tradition because they still saw a cultural value in teaching the more traditional texts, such as Shakespeare. The Cox report (as cited in Ward & Connolly, 2008) stated that "the texts that have helped shape the way British people think and speak, we are told, will provide all children with a 'common range of reference'" (p. 298). Even though the population in Britain was changing due to increased immigration, the Cox Report considered that canonical texts had the power to

bring individuals together, that regardless of their difference in culture, religion, or language, these texts would continue to reunite everyone as collectively being British, another way to celebrate their national pride. Despite this claim, the Cox Report (as cited in Ward & Connolly, 2008) was able to make a few recommendations to the new National Curriculum as it argues “against prescribing authors for use in schools, by the argument that teachers are better placed than government officials to understand the particular needs of their pupils and to cater to these needs through the selection of texts” (p. 296). The members of this implementation committee, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), recognize that teachers are the ones that work closely with their students; they would consider their interests and understand their individual needs. Thus, teachers would have a better sense of selecting the appropriate texts to study in their own classrooms. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority released a report in 2005 (as cited in Ward & Connolly, 2008) that “literary heritage should not be seen as a static and fixed list of texts, and that literary heritage must be constantly revised to include texts from diverse traditions” (p. 300). In the span of almost fifteen years, the QCA began to acknowledge the multiculturalism and globalization occurring in British society and argued that prescriptive lists were no longer appropriate to a constantly changing society: lists were not to be confined (for example, to only dead-white-male writers) but expanded to new authors (of different genders and cultures) and new print and non-print forms of texts. Even though the text study options have expanded to become more accommodating, Shakespeare still remains the only required author to be studied in the English National Curriculum.

### **3. The Shakespeare Debate**

The debate between whether or not to continue teaching Shakespeare began in the mid-1970s, “when all that was ‘traditional English’ began to come into question” (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 64). This debate is still relevant today as many high school curriculum documents and post-secondary degrees require a Shakespearean study, while many other institutions are choosing to make the study of Shakespeare an option, not a required component of study. Eaglestone (2000) divides the opposing groups into two categories: the *traditionalists* and *cultural materialists* (or iconoclasts).

#### **a) Pro-Shakespeare: Traditionalists**

The traditionalists argue that Shakespeare’s plays “are the greatest literary texts, which makes the study of them invaluable” (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 64). This key argument regarding Shakespeare’s plays are then broken down into three main categories: aesthetic worth, the values taught, and universal appeal (Willson, 1990; Bate, 1998; Breitsprecher, 2009). Armstrong and Arkin (1998) suggest that Shakespeare’s words have artistic merit and must be taught in literature classes; his works should be used as a point of comparison as many authors have been inspired by his themes and writings. In addition to the appreciation of the close reading of Shakespearean texts, traditionalists believe that the highest form of literature must address basic human values. Ryan (2000) argues that Shakespeare’s plays related to the human condition, exposing the on-going daily battles between good and evil. Regardless of one’s education, status, and wealth, the characters created by Shakespeare could be easily empathized by all. No other playwright has had as many staged productions, film adaptations, or translated versions as Shakespeare. His plays

are still the most readily performed in the world (Loomba & Orkin, 1998). As Eaglestone (2000) explains, many people consider that “Shakespeare’s plays are like a star: beautiful, remote, independent of the earth and worldly concerns, to be wondered at and admired” (p. 66). Four-hundred years after Shakespeare’s death, McCrum (2012) claimed that “his unique gift to our culture, language and imagination... universali[zed] the experience of living and writing in late 16th-century England and [he has] become widely recognized, and loved, across the world as the greatest playwright” (Retrieved March 27, 2017). Thus, many still believe that his “plots, which are brilliantly multifaceted, continue to inspire ceaseless adaptations and spin-offs” (McCrum, 2012), making him the most adapted and translated English playwright in the world.

#### **b) Anti-Shakespeare: Cultural Materialists**

In contrast to the traditionalists, the cultural materialists attack both Shakespeare’s plays and their institution, stating that they are “construct[s] of present-day political, cultural and economic interests, rather than a transcendent font of beauty, wisdom and values” (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 67). Dollimore (1994) states that cultural materialists are “concerned with the operations of power” (p. 3) and that the theatre in early modern England is “a prime location for the representation and legitimation of power” (p.3). Unlike traditionalists, who are mainly concerned with the “intrinsic meaning” of the text, a cultural materialist focuses on “recovering the political dimension of Renaissance drama” (Dollimore, 1994, p. 7) – the ways in which the plays project the importance of social and cultural obedience onto the audience or how they “demystify authority and even to subvert it” (p. 8). Taylor (1991) responds to those who claim that Shakespeare is the “best” writer, by asking who in fact has the power to declare this and

why: “When did people decide that Shakespeare was the greatest English dramatist?...Who did the deciding?” (p. 5). He refutes the argument by stating that one man’s work should not be used to judge the quality and artistic value of subsequent pieces: they should take on an identity that is completely independent and of its own (Hornbrook, 1988; Loomba & Orkin, 1998; Hawkes, 1992, 2002).

When Shakespeare was alive in the mid-to-late seventeenth century, over thirty playwrights also had their works published, and as a result he was not considered “the best” among his contemporaries. In rebuttal to the suggestion that Shakespeare taught humanistic values, Taylor (1991) and Hawkes (2002) assert that “the idea that a play can and inevitably does take part in the affairs of a society requires an abandonment of the notion of the primacy...the existence of any transcendental ‘meaning’” (Hawkes, 2002, p. 6) and thus, “no final context-free meaning or ‘truth’ can, should, or need be assigned to them” (p. 6). It is an overgeneralization to proclaim that everyone should have an identical response to the works of Shakespeare, or to anything for that matter. Since Shakespeare is an icon of “Englishness” or “British-ness,” the continued admiration of his works “creates a ‘we’, a sense of shared identity, and to dislike Shakespeare is seen almost as a declaration that you are not ‘one of us’ and not ‘patriotic’” (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 71). A social binary is then created, as those who read Shakespeare are considered civilized and those who do not are labeled as ill mannered. Rather than becoming an equalizer between classes, Shakespeare is surely identified with the elite and “social snobbery” (Hornbrook, 1988, p. 146). If Shakespeare becomes a signifier of social prestige, then the value of its literary criticism (or art form) is lost to ideas of commodity and patriotism. Hawkes (2002) argues that, alternatively, cultural

materialists “offer a view of cultures as inherently disunified... characteristically held together at any specific time by tensions between competing interests and different practices” (p.125).

**c) Shakespeare: Through a Post-Colonial Lens**

The most recent and common theoretical lens used to deconstruct Shakespeare’s works and institution is through a post-colonial perspective. There has been an increase in scholarship in this field since the first post-colonial papers were presented and published at the ‘Shakespeare – Post-coloniality’ Conference, held in Johannesburg in 1996 (Loomba & Orkin, 1998). Loomba & Orkin (1998) argue that Shakespeare’s works “reinforce cultural and racial hierarchies... endorsing existing racial, gender, and other hierarchies” (p. 1). Not only do Shakespeare’s plays marginalize non-Christians and those that are non-English, his works are, “a means of conquering independent peoples by denigrating or emasculating their own rich cultures... more proximate societies – Wales, Scotland, Ireland – have been enslaved by Shakespeare-waving oppressors” (Willson, 1990, p. 206). According to Eward-Magione (2014), “post-colonial writers recognize and expose the role that English Literature played in disseminating dichotomies such as center/margin, center/periphery, canonical/uncanonical, and civilized/uncivilized” (p. 148), with the hope of “encourag[ing] a new way to approach Shakespearean studies” (p.150). In her dissertation, Eward-Magione (2014) examines three modern adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays that “illuminate ongoing post-colonial predicaments” which results in an “epistemological shift that perceives the convergence of the theatrical and critical traditions” (p. 150). Her study looks at ways in which these plays attempted to “re-read

the raced and gendered discourses of colonialism within Shakespeare's plays, illustrate the threat of interracial unions to sentiments of British nationalism, and re-structure the original texts to alter, or at least challenge, colonial structures" (p. 147-148). The three plays examined "marginalized Shakespearean characters" in Shakespeare's *Othello*, *The Tempest*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* "and aim[ed] to amplify their conflict from the perspectives of a dominated culture" (p. ii.). Carlin's *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* (1967) focused on elements of race and gender, whereas Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969) paralleled "Prospero and Caliban as the colonizer and the colonized" (p. ii.), and Walcott's *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1983) "creatively adapts what might otherwise be an irrelevant play for an audience in the Caribbean, critically comments on the dual affinities of both Antony and Cleopatra" (p. 112). Therefore, the goal of these playwrights' modern adaptations is to "write-back" (Ashcroft et al. quoted in Eward-Magione) to the colonial narratives that are projected by the characters and themes of William Shakespeare.

#### **4. Case Studies and Research on Shakespeare in the Curriculum**

In this literature review, I provide four research studies regarding the appropriateness of including Shakespeare in the curriculum. All four studies examined the teaching of Shakespeare at the secondary school level, three of which took place in Alberta, and one in Iowa, United States. I will discuss them chronologically according to the year in which each study was conducted.

##### **a) Research Study 1 - Mersereau (1963)**

In her Master's Thesis in 1963, Mersereau conducted a study that examined which "instructional procedures were being used by Alberta teachers... for the

Shakespearean drama section of the English 30 course in the early 1960s” (p.1). Mersereau draws from the same reasons outlined by Burton (1960) and Hudson (1960) as to why the works of Shakespeare should continue to be taught: “his purposes were important, his themes were universal, his ideas were clear, his characters were multitudinous, and his philosophy was moral” (p. 12). Questionnaires were mailed to English 30 teachers “in eight urban centres of Alberta” (p. 84) in hopes of addressing the multiple methods by which high school English instructors teach and use Shakespearean plays within the classroom. Questions ranged from the number of students per English 30 class (an average of twenty-nine), the number of periods spent on working through a Shakespearean play (between fifteen and thirty classes), and the various activities used in the classroom with the “hope that students will gain an appreciation and understanding of the Shakespearean drama” (p. 85). Mersereau concluded that based on the participants in her study, teachers were generally “keenly interested in the discussing and sharing of methods for the teaching of the Shakespearean drama” (p. 85).

Many popular methods of teaching the Shakespearean drama included classroom lectures, group discussions, and reading the play aloud in class as the teacher explicated the main themes, characterization, and plot. Very few of the teacher participants, however, used the “acting method” (p.85), despite its genre or focused on analyzing the significance of language. It was also clear to Mersereau that the English 30 Departmental Exam impacted pedagogy as well; assessments assigned to students after the study of each play included literary essays (that are fewer than 500 words) and giving sets of Shakespearean passages with corresponding multiple choice questions to



work through, and thus, many teachers felt that they did not have sufficient enough time to “cover the Shakespearean play unit adequately” (p. 86).

Based on her analysis of the various methods of instruction, Mersereau recognized that the most “‘seldom used’ would seem to be oral, small group exercises” (p. 66), as most assessments were in the written form, either as essays, paraphrased paragraph summaries, plot diagrams, etc. Creative projects, such as “sketches, making stage models, costumes” and “research” (p. 66) were not provided as options. Mersereau recommends that “teachers place a greater emphasis upon oral activities” (p. 86) and that “English 30 teachers be encouraged to use an even greater variety of instructional procedures... to diversify the types of assignments which they give” (p. 87). In terms of my own research, this study allowed me to compare the effective strategies which ELA teachers used in their classrooms and to see whether many of these activities are still done in the classroom in the 21st Century.

**b) Research Study 2 – Altmann, Johnston & Mackey (1998) and Mackey, Vermeer, Storie & Deblois (2006)**

In 1996, Altmann, Johnston & Mackey distributed a questionnaire to teachers of twenty-two different high schools in both the Public and Catholic systems in Edmonton Alberta. These surveys asked teachers to list the titles of resources that were being used in their grade 10 English Language Arts classes (including English 10, 13, 16, pre-International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement). Of the twenty-two schools surveyed, twenty-one schools returned their responses and nearly 1700 different titles were listed. When they tallied the list of repeated titles, Altmann et al (1998) found that the two most popular texts studied in a grade 10 level English course were *Romeo and*

*Juliet* by William Shakespeare for the drama category and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee for the list of novels. However, in terms of the list of repeated authors, Shakespeare was still the most popular as there were “46 citations for *Romeo and Juliet* alone, and another 24 for other plays by Shakespeare, leading to a total of 70 out of 156 citations altogether (45%) (p. 208). What is interesting to note is that nearly half of the grade 10 English teachers opted to teach a Shakespearean play even though it is recommended rather than required. Also, the two most popular films taught were Zeffirelli’s (1968) adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* and Mulligan’s (1962) production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is odd that the most popular films studied were over thirty years old, suggesting that the use of the traditional print texts even influenced the choices of the use of multimedia in high school classrooms. Through this study, it was clear that a literary canon was followed and “overall, the teachers were most comfortable with their teaching of “great works from the Western tradition,” and least comfortable with adolescent/young adult selections and those by non-western authors” (p. 218).

Almost ten years later, Mackey et al (2006) repeated the same study and it yielded similar results, that “it was very striking that the titles themselves did not change much between 1996 and 2006” (p. 37). According to survey results from Mackey et al. (2006), of the top ten plays taught in ELA 10-1, seven of them were written by Shakespeare: “*Romeo and Juliet*, and the various Shakespeare plays combine for a total of 51 (75%)” (p. 38). Mackey et al. (2006) concluded that “the decade from 1996 to 2006 was a time of rapid transformation in contemporary media. However, such changes are reflected only to “a limited extent” (p. 45) and “this survey makes it clear that elements of this canon are deeply established” (p.51).

This study was relevant to my research as the teachers in my study were influenced by the same Alberta Program of Studies while deciding which texts to use in class. I wanted to distribute a similar questionnaire to other school jurisdictions in the province of Alberta to see whether the data were comparable with these earlier studies. The one thing I felt that needed to be further addressed in my study was the rationale behind choosing the texts themselves. In addition to a questionnaire for teachers to complete, I decided to interview a number of teachers from different schools to ask why their primary choice was Shakespeare. I hoped to discover what influenced their decision, their pedagogical practices of teaching the text, and how student skills were being assessed.

**c) Research Study 3 – Breitsprecher (2009)**

In her Master of Arts thesis, Breitsprecher investigated whether Shakespeare is still relevant to the twenty-first century secondary classroom. Through the methodology of narrative inquiry, she interviewed nine teachers, ranging from middle to high school, in rural, suburban and urban areas of Iowa. Breitsprecher separated her participants into three groups: teachers with less than three years of experience, teachers with four to nine years of experience, and teachers with ten to nineteen years of experience. Overall, the teachers of middle school were less enthusiastic about teaching Shakespeare, as they believed the language is too difficult for the students to comprehend. The teachers with less than three years of experience were excited to teach Shakespeare, stating that his themes were universal and that his plays could be used as a means for differentiated instruction. Those with four to nine years of experience claimed to teach Shakespeare because it would “help prepare students for

the standardized tests” (p. 30). The teachers with ten to nineteen years of experience considered that multiple adaptations of Shakespearean texts should be used in class; they recognized that the original text is more challenging to teach if there is a higher percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) students in the class. They even suggested allowing ESL or ELL students to use translated versions of the texts instead. There are even recommendations regarding how to incorporate technology and twenty-first Century literacies into Shakespearean studies.

Even though a majority of teachers in her study still saw the importance of teaching Shakespeare in the secondary school English classes, Breitsprecher’s research does highlight a debate between those who would rather opt out of teaching his plays and those who would like to continue teaching Shakespeare. Many of the teachers interviewed had very few ESL or ELL students in their classrooms. However, if students are given translated versions or abridged versions of text, they will miss the very experience of Shakespeare: his original poetic language and voice. Again, Shakespeare is used commonly for standardized testing, which I believe should not be the sole purpose of the plays existing in the classroom. A question I raised in my research was how teachers were effectively able to expose Shakespearean texts to their students and assess their engagement with the texts (while experiencing new forms of media).

**d) Research Study 4 – Ourdeva-Balinska, Johnston, Mangat, & McKeown (2014)**

This interpretive study “explored the responses of Canadian high school students from culturally-diverse backgrounds to readings of Shakespearean plays” (p.333). The goal of this study was to examine whether students from multicultural backgrounds

found Shakespeare relevant to their lives. The student participants in this research study were largely international students or of immigrant status, with English as their second or additional language. They were first asked “to reflect on their in-class writings and personal responses to reading [or] viewing the Shakespearean play in their English classes” (p. 338). They were then asked to complete a reading comprehension (multiple choice) component, similar to that of the grade twelve diploma exam. Many of the participants found that “cultural issues posed barriers to their understanding and enjoyment of the plays they studied in class” (p. 337). In addition to their inability to understand the cultural references within the Shakespearean texts, many found themselves distracted or even lost by its use of vocabulary and syntax. Many of the students had encountered the name Shakespeare in their lives before and recognize him as a “cultural icon, yet failed to respond emotionally to the plays they studied, and so did not come to appreciate them” (p. 344). Those who were able to personally relate their own experiences to the Shakespearean text themselves “appeared to be driven by overgeneralizations, first impressions previously-formed attitudes and opinions about Shakespeare as a historical person and writer” (p. 344). Thus, many understood that Shakespeare was an important name, but did not know why.

This study is appropriate for my own research as it addresses the difficulties English Language Learners (ELL) or students with different cultural backgrounds have when it comes to reading and responding to Shakespearean texts. These students came from a school that had similar contexts to that of my own, one that is highly academic with a high percentage of students going to post-secondary institutions after high school. It does question whether Shakespeare is still relevant to the changing

climates of the Canadian classrooms and whether students can still be academically successful without reading any of the plays. However, it would be interesting to interview students from Euro-Anglophone backgrounds with similar questions: do they face similar difficulties when examining the works of Shakespeare? Would they see value in studying his works when so many new and multicultural authors are available? If the students did not read any Shakespeare in their English classes, would they still read his plays on their own?

## **5. Conclusions**

Considering the research in this literature review, the debate on whether or not to include the works of William Shakespeare in the English curriculum is still alive and well. However, in my research, it is not a question of whether or not to include Shakespeare in the curriculum, but to examine whether he should remain the *only* required author. I think it is simplistic to narrow down the arguments between traditionalists (Bate, 1998) and cultural materialists (iconoclasts) into a simple binary. From the three case studies, it emerged that many English teachers do not necessarily agree that Shakespeare should be taken out of the curriculum, but they do recognize that teaching Shakespeare in the new classroom climate, with students that might not necessarily relate to the European context of his works, to be fairly challenging. The Alberta English Language Arts Program of Study is over ten years old and soon it will undergo the revision process. What I liked about the three case studies is that they gathered both teacher and student responses. In my research, I contacted teachers throughout the province of Alberta to ask whether they would like to see Shakespeare become a recommended writer instead of a required one. I interviewed the ten teachers who responded,

qualitatively interpreted their rationales for keeping Shakespeare in the curriculum and asked what they would teach in the place of Shakespeare. The other genres listed in the Program of Study allow teachers to make their own choices of text: I wanted to ask if teachers thought it was time to free up all the categories or if Shakespeare was the one author that is used to tie them all together. If other British Commonwealth countries, such as New Zealand (Houlahan, 2002), have chosen to remove Shakespeare as a required author in their English curriculum and from their standardized tests in order to encourage more in-depth studies of multicultural or indigenous literature, should Canada not do the same? A nation's progress is accredited to its people; the curriculum should respond in this way as well.

## **Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Methods**

In this section, I discuss three possible methodologies I considered in regards to conducting my research on Shakespeare's place and relevance in the Alberta English Language Arts curriculum before coming to a decision on which methodology best suited my research. Each methodology contributed to the common theme of "the globe" – either the name of the theatre in which Shakespeare's plays were performed or the idea of globalization, representing the multiple lenses and perspectives of Alberta high school English Language Arts teachers into which this research delves. In respect to each research problem, I also examined the purpose, key questions, methods and their limitations as I determined the most appropriate methodology for my research

### **1. Methods of Consideration**

#### **a) Quantitative Approaches**

I first considered whether to conduct a quantitative analysis, examining the correlation between the students' scores on the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage on the English 30-1 diploma exam and their diploma essay results if they chose to respond by using a Shakespearean text. The following were my thoughts about this kind of study:

This kind of experimental research (Creswell, 2009, p. 12) would examine the validity of the current Shakespearean section of the Alberta English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. This exam is written in two parts; in addition to the multiple-choice reading comprehension part of the exam, students also are required to write two responses, one specifically on a text of their choice. This research problem would also



address the following sub-questions:

1. What percentages of students in the province choose to write their critical/analytical response on Shakespearean texts?
2. Which are the most common Shakespearean plays written about on the exam?
3. Are students coded as English Language Learner (ELL) achieving the same averages on the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage as the students that are not coded?

Since I would be looking only at the results of students who wrote their diploma exam essay on a Shakespearean text, the participants would not be randomly assigned to groups, making this a quasi-experimental design (Creswell, 2009). From this selected sample of “matching participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 155), I would divide the data into two groups – students coded as English Language Learner (ELL) and students who are not coded at all. From these two groups, I would first look at their results on the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage (independent variable), and then I would see if there is a relationship with their results on the written portion of the exam (dependent variable). In this *correlational design*, my research non-hypothesis would be that there is no direct correlation and my alternate-hypothesis would be that there is. I would then apply an inferential statistical analysis to determine my results.

The ability to obtain such data would be easier if I were to receive ethics approval from the Learner Assessment Department of Alberta Education, as the results and categories for each exam are recorded and available. As an external researcher, my level of bias would be limited in a quantitative study as well. There are two main diploma exam-writing sessions a year: one in January and one in June. Approximately 14,000

students write the English 30-1s exam in January and 16,000 in June. The sample numbers are large, thereby naturally increasing the reliability of the data in the experiment. However, not all students who are English Language Learners are actually coded as such; some might have had their coding removed after being in the education system for so many years, which would skew my results.

I believed this would be a valid quasi-experiment, as it would determine whether students coded as English Language Learners struggled with the Shakespearean part of the exam more than those who are not coded. It would be interesting to examine whether their struggles stemmed not only from questions regarding the elements of language, but cultural aspects as well (Ward & Connolly, 2008). If a correlation were not found between the results of the two different Shakespearean parts of the exam for non-coded ELL students, then this discrepancy would allow me to begin to question the validity of the exam. If students could answer (or guess) multiple-choice questions correctly, but could not synthesize ideas from the texts themselves in writing, they would not have not fully demonstrated their knowledge, understanding, and skills of Shakespeare. Conversely, if ELL students were getting contextual questions incorrect, I could begin to ask whether they were being marginalized simply because they did not come from Christian backgrounds or were not fully assimilated into Western society.

As I reflected on this research design, I decided it had limitations for my study. Even though this quasi-experiment would be able to detect some form of correlation between both groups of data, it still would be unable to determine all the factors that support the directional hypothesis (Keppel, 1991; Creswell, 2009). This design would be similar to an image of a play in which audience members can only see what is

happening on stage and are unaware of what occurs in the background – the planning involved, the set construction, the director’s intent, the time put into rehearsals, etc. – which is fundamental to each successful production. Even though only what is seen on stage is lit, the image is elongated and out of focus, representing a limited and skewed perspective. I then decided to consider a different methodological approach.

## **b) Qualitative Approaches**

I next considered the advantages of adopting a qualitative research approach. A qualitative methodology would be able to offer broader insights into the reasons behind various sets of data. According to Creswell (2009), the researcher is able to make “interpretations of the meaning of the data” (p. 4), by “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Rather than simply pointing out a problem or issue, qualitative research examines its potential causes and influences.

Qualitative methodologies allow us to understand the physical, socio-economical, and political structures that influence the data. Audience members either stand in the pit or sit in the stands when they watch a performance; they have no idea what is going on in the background: all the various, more subtle elements that are used to create a spectacular show. According to Butler (1990), we are all performers on the stage: we define who we are physically, psychologically, and socially (represented by the three different levels of the theatre) by the reaction of others – the symbolic constructs of hegemony. For these reasons, I decided qualitative research would be more appropriate for my topic of study and would allow me to explore teachers’ viewpoints on selecting and teaching Shakespeare in their classrooms rather than focusing on

students' Diploma examination results. I next decided whether I would conduct a narrative inquiry study or use a case study approach.

### Narrative Inquiry

If I decided to use a narrative inquiry method, my qualitative research problem would explore the “lived experience” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 22), of high school English educators in response to teaching Shakespeare. Teachers are often actors, playing a part as well, and I was intrigued about learning their viewpoints on the value of including Shakespeare’s plays in their English language arts curricula and their pedagogical theories and approaches to Shakespeare: how they teach Shakespeare in their own classrooms, and how they think their students respond to their various strategies. I understood that this was still a very broad topic, so I thought it wise to narrow it down by focusing on ways in which teachers bring in multimedia in their Shakespeare unit to promote 21<sup>st</sup>- century literacies (Breitsprecher, 2009).

Through a narrative inquiry model, I thought I could have conversations with six Alberta high school English teachers (in or around the city of Edmonton) regarding their three-dimensions of inquiry space: the temporal, social, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). While selecting my participants, I would try to ensure that there was an equal representation of males and females, from both public and Catholic school boards. I would also vary the number of years and experience in which the teachers have taught into three groups in hopes of broadening levels of perspectives and lenses (Creswell, 2009): teachers with one to three years of experience, teachers with four to ten years of experience, and teachers with over ten years of experience. There would be multiple conversations with participants over time: during the planning and

conceptualization of the Shakespeare unit, while educators are in the classroom teaching the unit, and their reflections once the teaching of the unit is complete. I would then audio-record each conversation and have them transcribed; the participants would then have the opportunity to agree to what is being used as data and have the ability to reflect on what he or she said in the past. I would also provide each of them with field notes from my observations in their classrooms.

In terms of temporality, I would ask teachers how they feel about Shakespeare, not only throughout their academic career, but their personal lives as well: their response to Shakespeare's works as high school students, university students, and as educators. Perhaps there might be some thematic correlations between how they approach Shakespeare in their own classrooms and how they were taught in the past: how much of the study was purely textual and how much of the study was performative.

To analyze sociality, I would ask questions that involved "the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form each individual's context" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p 23). The stage is shaped in a cylindrical manner, where the stage is located in the bottom centre, which is comparable to Foucault's (1995) theory of the pan-opticon. If teachers were aware that they are constantly being observed by others, would they make decisions that are "safe" to protect themselves or do they purposely create controversial activities to facilitate student engagement and learning? Teachers' choices are influenced by "the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequence" (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). Even though part of the Globe's stage is called "discovery space," the actors themselves are bound by the script and boundaries between the

stage and the audience: they can be creative with their roles, but cannot diverge from them. For Alberta teachers, Shakespeare's works are a requirement in the curriculum, but teachers have multiple ways of teaching the many plays to their students. I would ask the following questions about space:

- What time of year do you usually teach the Shakespearean play?
- How long do you spend teaching the Shakespearean unit in an academic English course?
- Does the teacher select the play for the students or do the students get the opportunity to decide? Are the plays and levels in which they are taught an agreement made by the English Department?
- In what ways does the English 30-1 diploma exam influence the teachers' ways of approaching Shakespeare?
- Has the push for the usage of technology influenced the teachers' approaches to Shakespeare? Which multimedia devices are used in addition to the text?
- In what ways are students responding to Shakespeare? Are there are particular group of individuals who are excelling or having difficulties?

After gathering the qualitative data, I would code the interviews and interpret them, and make recommendations to how Shakespeare should be approached in the English Language Arts curriculum in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

However, I decided that there were limitations in using the narrative inquiry methodology for this study. Very few perspectives would be represented and the conclusions might have become over-generalized. Also, the time it would take to conduct the series of conversations and observations would be lengthy: some

participants might lose interest and drop out of the study as well (Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006, p. 4). If my research interpretations were to be constructed as a proposal to the Alberta Curriculum Revision Committee about the maintenance or removal of Shakespeare as a required author in the Program of Studies, it would be very difficult to get proportional representation from the province. It simply would be impossible to organize a time to interview teachers and observe their classroom logistically, and therefore the rural school's voice would be under-represented.

I was particularly interested in proportionally representing the voices of the province of Alberta. especially because the Alberta High School English Program of Studies will be under review and will likely be implemented in 2022; the data perhaps could have a significant influence on how Shakespeare is presented and taught in the future.

## **2. Which Methodology?**

### **a) Case Study Approach**

I finally decided that my selected qualitative methodology would be a case study approach. Case studies “allow one to present data collected from multiple methods” (Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006, p. 4). Like narrative inquiry, case studies allow “investigators to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, such as individual life cycles, small group behavior... [and] school performance” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Through an explanatory multiple-case study approach, which “examine[s] the data closely both at a surface and deep level in order to explain the phenomena in the data” (Zainal, 2007, p.3), I am thus able to “closely examine the data within a specific context” (Zainal, 2007, p. 1). As a high school English Language Arts teacher in Alberta, I

considered this as an intrinsic case study – a term derived by Stake (1995) – as I “have a genuine interest” (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 548) in the literature other English teachers choose for their classes to study in the province. Therefore, I interviewed 10 teachers from the province of Alberta who taught in large urban centers. To ensure that multiple perspectives were presented, I interviewed five females and five males with a variety of teaching experience. The levels of teaching experience were divided into two groups: one of participants with fewer than fifteen years and one with over fifteen years of teaching experience.

I compiled my initial questions based on a textual analysis of the Alberta high school English Language Arts program of studies documents, concentrating on its changes over the last twenty-five years. I looked closely at the post-colonial language (Loomba & Orkin, 1998) used to reference either Shakespeare or his works, especially implications drawn from culture and tradition, to see whether these rationales still applied in ELA classrooms today. I focused my interviews on the following questions:

- What is the rationale for requiring Shakespeare in the Alberta High School English Language Arts Program of Study? To what extent has this rationale changed or remained the same?
- Considering the demographical changes in the English Language Arts classroom climate, in what ways do teachers and students still find the works of Shakespeare to be relevant?
- How do the works of the literary canon prevent the inclusion of multicultural texts and non-Eurocentric perspectives in the classroom?
- If teaching Shakespeare were no longer a required in the Program of Studies, would



you still teach his plays? Why or why not?

- If you had the option to teach a text other than Shakespeare, what would it be? Why?

Many quantitative researchers argue that “case study researchers have not been systematic in their data collection or have allowed bias in their findings” ((Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006, p. 4). In order to maintain validity in this study, I was careful that all interviews were diligently noted – that all records were constantly and consistently kept throughout.

I first designed an online survey to send to English language arts teachers in the province. Through an online survey, such as Google Forms, “researchers can create their own surveys quickly using custom templates and post them on Website or e-mail them for participants to complete” (Creswell, 2009, p. 149). I made these survey questions available to any high school English teacher in Alberta, hoping to strengthen my sample size, thereby increasing the reliability of my data. I received 10 responses out of 30 that were sent out. Teacher participants were given the option of either being interviewed or taking an online survey of the same list of questions. Even though some of data collection was conducted as a survey rather than a personal interview, the questions were open-ended enough that I was able to qualitatively interpret the data, and code for similar themes as I did with the interviews. This survey provided me with another means of data, which I hoped would correlate overall with the interview responses. After completing the data collection with my ten participants I transcribed their responses, coded and analyzed the major themes (Sue & Ritter, 2007).

Ideally, my qualitative research design would include the perspectives of many participants if the study were to bring about major changes to the curriculum.

Nevertheless, I hoped my small study would offer insight into the reasons Shakespeare is being taught in schools today and teachers' perspectives on the relevance of his plays for students today. If Shakespeare is taught to simply maintain its tradition, then I believe now is the time to re-examine the rationale of continuing to teach Shakespeare in the 21st Century, to explore ways of exposing students in diverse classrooms to Shakespeare effectively, while including more multicultural texts in the Alberta English Language Arts curriculum.

**b) Data Collection**

My data collection consisted of person-to-person interviews or emailed survey responses from those teacher participants that could not meet with me. After obtaining ethical permission from the University and school district, I sent a letter of introduction and purpose of study to several English Department Heads in a large urban school district to recruit participants. I also forwarded the same letter to English Language Arts colleagues that I personally knew. The participant letter was sent out to 30 English Teachers, and ten responded positively and agreed to participate in the interview process. The interviews were organized based on a set of predetermined questions, which I e-mailed to each teacher in advance (see Appendix for details). My intention was to allow them the opportunity to reflect on their pedagogical approaches and to encourage a variety of extended responses. These questions were divided into three main categories on the topic of teaching Shakespeare in Senior High School English Language Arts, namely teaching philosophy, curricular planning, and teaching practice. Grouping my interview questions into these themes provided a framework to collect specific information and yet allot a space for each individual to speak from his or her

personal experience. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and a copy of interview responses was given to participants to ensure accuracy. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), “reporting a case study can be a difficult task for any researcher due to the complex nature of the approach [and] it is difficult to report the findings in a concise manner...readily understood by the reader” (p. 555), this concern is further reiterated by Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) who “recognize the importance of effectively organizing data” (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 554). I thus organized responses in the form of a database and color-coded common language used by the participants, in which I was able to see patterns.

### *The Teachers in the Study*

The ten teachers, five male and five female, represented a wide range of teaching experience that divided into two groups: teachers who had taught high school English Language Arts between five to fifteen years, and those whose experience exceeded fifteen years. Each teacher had taught all high school levels, from grades ten through twelve and both -1 and -2 streams, of the Alberta Senior High School English Language Arts Program of Study. Seven of the ten teachers had also taught the English Literature Higher Level component as part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma program concurrently with the Alberta curriculum. Three had taught various levels of English Language courses for English Language Learners (ELL), including language acquisition through written and oral communication. In terms of teaching contexts, each participant taught in large urban public high schools with a student body between 700 and 2400 students. Each school offered a variety of programming for students, including International Baccalaureate, Registered Apprenticeship Program,

Work Experiences, and many extra-curricular opportunities, including, but not limited to, athletics, fine arts, student council, community leadership, and hobby clubs. Some schools also offered specialized programming such as French Immersion and the Interaction Program dedicated for students with autism, and/or dedicated English Language Learner sites.

The interviews were conducted between December 2014 and March 2015, as many teachers required time to reflect on the interview questions as well as to organize a time to meet with me. Each teacher appeared to be intrigued by the study and many of them devoted quite a lot of time to the study; despite their busy workloads, they took the time to answer each question carefully. During the time of the interview process, all but one of the participants were teaching high school level English Language Arts courses, and thus were able to reflect on their personal experiences and philosophies of teaching Shakespeare in their classes. The following questions were posed to the teachers:

### *Teaching Philosophy*

- a. Discuss your rationale for continuing to teach Shakespeare in the classroom.
- b. Considering the demographical changes in the English Language Arts classroom climate, in what ways do teachers and students in your school still find the works of Shakespeare to be relevant?
- c. In what ways can the study of Shakespeare be used to support the expansion of multi-literacies and multimodal texts in the high school English Language Arts classroom?
- d. To what extent do you believe that the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage in the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is still valid?
- e. If Shakespeare was no longer a required author in English 20-1 and English 30-1 would you continue to teach his works? What would you teach in his place?

### *Lesson/Unit Planning*

- a. Which Shakespearean plays do you often teach in your English 20-1 and 30-1 classes? Why?
- b. Do you teach a Shakespearean play to your English 10-1 class? Why or why not?
- c. To what extent does the English 30-1 diploma exam influence your approach to teaching Shakespeare?

### *Teaching Practice*

- a. What effective strategies do you use to teach Shakespeare?
- b. Describe the classroom activities or assignments you use to assess your students' understanding of Shakespearean texts.
- c. To what extent are you able to include multicultural texts and non-Eurocentric perspectives in the classroom?

The questions were merely used as a topical guide for each teacher, but each interview or survey yielded a variety of responses, reflecting each teacher's different perspective and strategies about teaching Shakespeare.

### **c) Data Presentation**

As I reflected on the data that I collected, I drew conclusions by using a qualitative approach in which I developed themes from the participants' responses. Of course, all qualitative studies are restricted to the ways in which participants are able to articulate their opinions in an accurate or comprehensible manner. Thus, the researcher cannot fully see the complete context attached to each response, as some "obvious" procedural information might have been omitted by the participant and left to the researcher to only assume. The goal of the researcher is to recognize the potential

sensitivity of each response and draw meaning behind how each teacher perceived their own personal situation. I gained further insight as to whether Senior High School English teachers continued to see the value of teaching the works of Shakespeare in the Alberta classroom and the approaches or strategies they found pedagogically successful. My next chapter will describe the results of my study.

## **Chapter Four: Thematic Findings and Analysis**

Based on my analysis of the various research participant responses, I have divided this chapter into five key themes. First, I discuss the common rationales presented in support of the continued study of Shakespeare's plays in the high school English Language Arts curriculum. Second, I address the current demographics of Alberta urban classrooms and discuss the influence of these demographics for students learning Shakespeare. Third, I share the pedagogical considerations many teachers have as they plan their lessons and units around Shakespearean texts. Fourth, in addition to these pedagogical considerations, I have also included effective strategies and activities used in the classroom to support student learning. The last section asks English teachers to consider other options in the place of Shakespeare and whether they feel that there is an equivalent author. Many of these themes I feel reaffirm previous studies promoting the study of Shakespeare in the Alberta English Language Arts curriculum.

### **1. Rationales for Teaching Shakespeare**

#### **a) Mandatory in Curriculum and Standardized Assessment**

The Alberta Education English Language Arts Program of Studies states that, "in the ELA 10-1, 20-1, 30-1 course sequence, a greater degree of emphasis is given to the study of essays and Shakespearean plays" (2003, p. 7). Thus, the most significant distinction between an academic high school English course and alternative language art programs is the compulsory study of the Shakespearean play, with the understanding that students would develop competent skills of literary analysis and

appreciation of literary criticism. The fact that only academic courses require the study of Shakespeare also inadvertently legitimizes its literary merit and reinforces the significance placed on the literary canon.

When asked what were their main reasons for teaching Shakespearean plays in their -1 streamed high school classes, six out of ten participants that I interviewed first acknowledged that “it is in the curriculum” or “I teach it because it is a requirement.” It is imperative to note that many teachers first recognize this provincial mandate, and as professionals, continue to develop courses that connect directly to curricular outcomes. In addition to pointing out the importance of teaching the curriculum, many teachers expressed additional reasons for incorporating Shakespeare as an author of study. According to most recent Alberta English Language Arts Program of Study (2003), “The senior high school English language arts program highlights six language arts - listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing” (p. 2). Some participants believe that teaching an entire play would fulfill all five general outcomes as well as the six strands of Language Arts, while other teachers believe that providing students with the skills to explicate Shakespearean passages would allow them to improve their reading comprehension skills, a task that is also assessed in the English 30-1 diploma exam:

*It's required. You can meet the general outcomes using Shakespearean texts.*

*Because he is a mandated author, I teach his plays mostly for reading comprehension as the students are tested on their ability to understand a passage from his works at the end of grade 12.*

However, some teachers are willing to admit that since Shakespeare has always been



traditionally taught in English literature courses, that they are simply willing to continue in that academic tradition, citing the abundance of resources and various adaptations.

*Well.... Initially I simply followed the curriculum/tradition. Shakespeare in 10-1 to 30-1 was simply expected both in the curriculum and within the school department in which I started.*

*I am not an English major, and I therefore have not been part of developing the English modules that our school uses. I teach it because it is part of the Alberta Education Program of Studies.*

Although the study of two Shakespearean plays is required through the course of a student's high school English Language Arts experience, many teachers say that their students often study at least three. Unlike Shakespearean dramas, more specifically the tragedy, the study of a Modern Drama is often encouraged or offered as a choice between the study of a novel or feature-length film. As a result, a student is less likely to encounter a modern play if they spend a substantial amount of time in a semester working through a Shakespearean text. Contemporaries of Shakespeare are often ignored or omitted (as are many other playwrights) - many students do not experience Marlow, Johnson or Fletcher until they enroll in a Renaissance Drama course in post-secondary education. As suggested in the Alberta Program of Studies, "one aim is to encourage, in students, an understanding and appreciation of the significance and artistry of literature" (2003, p.1). Many of my teacher participants acknowledged that students are more likely to read novels and non-fiction texts independently; the reading of scripts is uncommon. They are concerned that a student's perspective of the drama genre can be greatly skewed by being only exposed to Shakespearean plays: "By

choosing Shakespeare first and almost only, we ignore these other periods. As a result, many of our students seem to believe that “the great” plays came from only one period, and particularly, one period in the white Anglo-Saxon western tradition” (Fenwick & Parsons, 1996, p. 25).

In the following section, I will explore other common rationales provided by other English instructors as to why they would choose to continue to teach Shakespearean plays regardless of its mandatory requirements. A recent Washington report suggests that, “English majors at the vast majority of the country’s most prestigious colleges and universities are not now required to take an in-depth Shakespeare course — but the Bard remains a fixture in high school English classes” (Strauss, 2015). Many educators believe that there is still merit in exposing English Language Arts students to the poetic language and universal themes of Shakespeare’s works.

#### **b) Traditional Icon & Writer of Literary Merit**

In their study interviewing high school students about learning Shakespearean texts, Balinska-Ourdeva et al. (2014) concluded that students believe “Shakespeare ought to be appreciated because of the author’s historical, literary and education[a] status is [a] deeply entrenched notion in today’s Canadian students (p. 337). Although a majority of these students spoke many other languages in addition to English, and came from various cultural backgrounds, they still acknowledged Shakespeare as a cultural icon. The researchers noted that despite the fact students found Shakespeare’s language challenging, their reverential attitudes “attest to the power of Shakespeare as a symbol of high culture, and indicate the success of the ‘civilizing’ role that schools play in the perpetuation of his status is as a cultural icon, associated with intelligence,

sophistication, and refined aesthetic taste” (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2014, p. 337). Thus, many students link the more intellectual aspects and high art of the English literature course to Shakespeare: “They are presented with Shakespeare as a pristine classic, unquestionable with regards to its authority, legitimacy, and cultural value” (Balinska-Ourdeva et al, 2014, p. 337). Similar to the opinions of these high school students, many of the teachers I interviewed expressed these views as well. One participant commented that even students in the non-academic stream appreciated the opportunity to study his plays, even though Shakespeare was not a requirement in their stream:

*I don't want to make this more complex than it sounds, but I have seen students in non-academic courses show considerable pride that they were studying Shakespeare like the other students were.*

*I'm not so naive to think that this remains a really consciously important piece of their schooling, but it is a common part of academic culture that connects disparate groups of people. It probably sounds silly, but somewhere deep down I think I do think that opening up possibilities for kids to connect with Shakespeare opens up other cultural and academic possibilities.*

Fenwick and Parsons (1996) suggest, “Maybe Alberta English teachers teach the Big Three out of a simple sense of honouring tradition. Shakespeare plays have been taught for hundreds of years to recalcitrant students” (p. 23) and that many believe that “Shakespeare should remain on the list because it always has been on the list” (p. 22). These feelings continue to be present today:

*Perhaps further down the road, I think you'd be hard pressed to find a university-*

*educated person who does not have Shakespeare as part of their literary background.*

*Blasphemous to think otherwise. Now...?*

*I think it is mostly tradition than any other reason to have such a high regard for Shakespeare's plays.*

Not only are the works of Shakespeare representative of a literary tradition, but three specific tragedies are continuously being taught: More than 20 years ago, Fenwick & Parsons suggested that “English teachers have spent so many years learning how to understand *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* that they cannot bear to waste the nuggets of knowledge from their own patient years of immersion in these great works” (p. 23). Even today, these same plays remain the most popular ones taught in Alberta schools.

### **c) Timelessness of Universal Themes & Poetics of Language**

The Alberta Education Program of Studies states “Literature invites students to reflect on the significance of cultural values and the fundamentals of human existence; to think about and discuss essential, universal themes; and to grapple with the intricacies of the human condition” (2003, p.1). When it comes to reading Shakespeare, many teachers today believe that his themes are universal and are still relevant topics today:

*I also feel that if approached correctly the themes in his plays and sonnets are relevant today.*

*There are also characters whose dialogue provides a unique window into, as cheesy as it sounds, their souls.*

Turchi and Thompson (2013), in their discussion of Shakespeare’s place in

American education, argue that “Many ELA teachers believe the benefit of teaching Shakespeare resides in his treatment of universal themes, the Common Core wants students to discover those themes, not simply regurgitate them” (p. 34). Teachers in my study generally agreed with this comment, considering that Shakespeare does not only allow students to appreciate the beauty of language, but also the beauty of the human spirit. The study of Shakespearean plays “provides students with the opportunity to develop self-understanding. They imagine the worlds that literature presents and understand and empathize with the characters that literature creates” (Alberta Education, 2003, p.1).

In the study conducted by Balinska-Ourdeva et al (2014), anecdotal evidence suggested that more often than not students would “affirm rather than challenge the cultural capital of the Bard and his position as the source of wisdom and important values” (338). Despite recognizing that Shakespeare’s plays had been written in a different time and a different place, many students made connection to the values promoted in the plays they read, in which moralistic characters that demonstrated sound judgement often deserved to be rewarded. “Participants identified specific words and phrases in the excerpts, which, in their view, somehow affected them...Almost all participants claimed a connection to their personal lives to be the reason for selecting reminders” (Balinska-Ourdeva et al, 2014, p. 340). These students were able to place themselves in the perspectives of many of Shakespeare’s characters and relate to their choices and responses to conflict. “To make sense of the passages, students also strongly relied on popular culture associations: familiar film or television characters” (Balinska-Ourdeva et al, 2014, p. 341). These students’ comments reinforced the

perspectives of several of my participants about the enduring values in Shakespeare's plays.

Equally as important as the timeless and universal aspects of Shakespeare themes, many teachers believe in the importance of exposing the beauty of Shakespeare's language, and recognizing the genius of his craft. By studying Shakespeare, "students come to understand how text creators use language to produce effects, such as suspense, humour and pathos, and to create multiple layers of meaning" (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1). Also reiterated by Fenwick and Parsons (1996), "some teachers argue for using Shakespeare because, in our enlightened response-based holistic approach to language arts, we use the play...to generate language learning...The focus is then not so much on the play but on developing students' language appreciation of literature through the experience of that play" (p. 25). The teacher participants believed that Shakespearean plays would allow students to examine the significance of the evolving English language:

*I think that teaching Shakespeare in the ELA classroom is important as an examination of language more than story. As our students become more savvy with their technology and as their means of communication change, it's important for students to see that language is an evolving organism, and isn't static.*

*Besides the fact that I am required to teach Shakespeare in some courses, I aim to bring students toward appreciating the language metamorphosis (recognizing the malleability of language and its penchant for metamorphosis and appreciating the ideas (human nature, etc.).*

Also, compared to modern prose, the language of Shakespeare often takes students a

greater time to comprehend, and thus they further appreciate the meaning and effects created in the writing:

*I think there is something to be said for the way that reading Shakespeare slows things down for kids and encourages (requires) close reading and perhaps, more accurately, close listening. The real power in Shakespeare is in considering language as a spoken art form. It allows a gateway into poetry and into dialogue in multiple prose forms. I do think that I could teach the full breadth and depth of the language arts using Shakespeare as a base and I don't think that is true of many - if any - other writers.*

*Characters and dialogue - I haven't heard many teachers talk about this explicitly, but I do think that the primary rationale for teaching these plays are characters who are more fully developed and more infinitely questionable than other characters.*

#### **d) Cultural and Political Influence**

Shakespeare, like many writers of literary merit, gained acclamation by challenging social conventions – his contemporaries saw him as being revolutionary. Not only is Shakespeare appreciated and celebrated for his talented words, he is also revered as a man of cultural and political influence. Some participants mentioned that although Shakespeare's plays were marks of patriotism, he also encouraged the common people to attend the theatre by inserting common vernacular and topical scenarios. Shakespeare also influenced many other writers and in order to appreciate their allusions to Shakespeare, one should be exposed to the source of inspiration:

*I teach it for the more difficult issues and ideas it raises.*

*I also think that it's important for students to recognize that Shakespeare's works weren't just for the higher classes, and that there is much humour and wordplay to be found in many of the plays.*

*As a secondary reason, I find that western art constantly makes use of Shakespeare, just as Shakespeare made use of his predecessors, so there is a connectivity to contemporary texts that also makes sense.*

For most academic English Language Arts courses in Alberta, many teachers will spend twenty to twenty-five classes in the span of a semester teaching a Shakespearean play. No other author comes close in terms of the time devoted in class to Shakespeare. Fenwick and Parsons (1996) recognize that “A particular piece of literature, especially one which occupies so much classroom time relative to other pieces and which recurs each year in students’ schooling, has the power to influence students’ values and beliefs, their worldview, their understandings of how literature works and how they can enter and make meaning from it, as well as their language” (p.25-26).

## **2. Relevancy of Shakespeare in Contemporary Urban Alberta Classrooms**

### **a) More Diverse Classrooms with Higher Percentage of English Language Learners**

In 1996, Fenwick and Parsons noted that “A teacher spen[t] an average of four to six weeks on Shakespeare - which [was] more likely than unlikely - the average teacher spen[t] about 15 weeks out of 40 teaching Shakespeare” (p. 25). This observation of course applied to full-year English classes, in which students had an average instruction time of 75 minutes every other day. This is equivalent to 7.5 weeks of class in a semestered course, which works out to just under two months out of a five- month time



span. Due to changing demands and classroom demographics, many teachers are no longer able to spend half of their term studying a Shakespeare text. In 2009, Breitsprecher conducted interviews with English Language Arts teachers in Idaho and found that first-year teachers often felt that they ‘ran out of time’ and opted to ‘help prepare... students for the standardized tests” (p. 30), a direction significantly impacted by school administration. Although many classes consisted of a significant percentage of ELL students, as well as gifted students, teachers continued to incorporate the study of a Shakespearean play in their course, stating “Shakespeare is the quintessential writer. He is revered. He is timeless. How can any English teacher in good conscience NOT teach the works of William Shakespeare?” (Breitsprecher, 2009, p. 32). The students that were interviewed by Balinska-Ourdeva et al. (2014) “consistently pointed to vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. The archaic nature of Shakespearean language combined with the complex metaphoric and literary styles hindered understanding” (p. 336) and “also commented on how cultural issues posed barriers to their understanding of the plays they studied in class. The amount of background knowledge required seemed to add another level of distance between the reader and the text” (337). Many of the teacher participants I interviewed had mentioned that they spend anywhere between two to four weeks teaching the Shakespearean play, which is less than half of the time spent two decades ago. They also recognize the larger proportion of ELL students with non-Christian backgrounds that struggle with both the language and cultural references: “Some of the students mobilized their cultural background, particularly religious affiliations... failing to consider the contextual clues the words of the page offer” (Balinska-Ourdeva et al, 2014, p. 343-344). As one of my participants

mentioned,

*As our classrooms become more diverse, with a greater percentage of non-native English speakers as well as students from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the challenge with teaching Shakespeare is that there will be a lot lost in translation especially when considering students who have had no exposure to these works.*

**b) Relevance to Human Condition**

With the changing classroom demographics, teachers do admit to their struggle of making the works of Shakespeare relevant to students. A participant in Breitsprecher's study (2009) suggested that "The secret to making Shakespeare relevant to your students is knowing your students and what 'makes them tick'" (p.32). Teachers in my study expressed concerns over time management and their choice to place a greater emphasis on reading comprehension skills and writing, especially in environments filled with student refugees who need to ultimately learn to communicate in the English language:

*The school system continues to believe in his irreplaceability and relevance while students struggle to understand his texts.*

*It is getting harder and harder to convince kids who have escaped war torn homelands that a dead white guy matters.*

Nonetheless, despite these recent challenges, teachers feel that students in a relatively diverse classroom are still able to find relevance in the human issues expressed in Shakespeare's plays, once the language has been explicated and comprehended:

*Students seem to find relevance in the human responses to problems – their*

*passions, their lack of reason, their stupidity. The process of translating the text into either a more modern or familiar context seems to give students a chance to understand and enter into the text in a new way.*

*Relevance is more and more a challenge, though as many have likely already stated, the questions Shakespeare raises are timeless.*

**c) Not as Relevant**

When questioned if there were any ways in which Shakespeare was no longer relevant in the 21st-Century English Language Arts classroom, many teachers still argued the timeless nature of his themes, but also highlighted that these themes could be found in other authors and genres as well. They were certain that they would integrate Shakespeare in some form; in addition to teaching his plays, they would incorporate his poetry or discuss the power of well-known speeches in class. The intent of course, is to expose students to the effectiveness of beautiful writing. It is also important to them that the origins of the English language are presented in class so that students begin to appreciate its malleable nature:

*Although Shakespeare is often thought as the origin of many of our literacies, many of the experiences he presents are alien to those experienced by our students.*

However, many also admitted that if they had the choice, they would not teach Shakespeare in all three academic high school Language Arts levels, that teaching one play would suffice:

*In short, I would introduce Shakespeare because of his iconic status and important influence on the British literary tradition, but see no reason to teach him*

*both in grade 11 and in grade 12.*

Nevertheless, if students did not study a Shakespearean play in high school, they would be less likely to expose themselves to this genre in post-secondary:

*It is increasingly irrelevant. Although the themes are timeless and know no boundaries, the unlikely continuance of studying Shakespeare in post-secondary makes it a tougher sell.*

#### **d) Our Teachers' Responsibility to Make Works Relevant to Students**

Another aim in the Alberta ELA Program of Studies is to “enable each student to understand and appreciate language and to use it confidently and competently for a variety of purposes, with a variety of audiences and in a variety of situations for communication, personal satisfaction and learning” (2003, p.1). Thus it is the teacher’s responsibility to make literature more accessible. This course is to provide students with the skills to appreciate craft and artistry before being able to access or articulate whether they ‘like’ the literature in which they engage:

*Students from all sorts of places and cultural backgrounds don't find relevance in Shakespeare. They don't find relevance in Trigonometry either. It is our jobs to make it relevant.*

Balinska-Ourdeva et al. (2014) suggest the importance of “the need of providing students with the appropriate critical apparatus *before* they have been asked to engage personally with the text” (p. 345). It is imperative that educators draw from the experiences of their students, as this will significantly impact the way in which they interpret a text, but it is equally important that critical thinking skills are applied so that the connection between these two spaces are valid or plausible. According to Turchi &

Thompson (2013), "If teachers want to promote analysis and the use of textual evidence effectively, students need to hear less about an 'answer' and have more opportunities to ponder the meaning of a play or passage" (p. 34).

*It might be asking a lot of a 15 -17 year old to recognize the relevance of these plays in any meaningful way. That's not to say that I haven't had many - or at least some - who have, but could any of us say that we "got" Hamlet or Macbeth or even Romeo or Juliet when we were kids. I guess what I'm suggesting is that even though they may not see the resonance and relevance, doesn't mean it doesn't exist.*

#### **e) Shakespeare as a Form of Multi-Literacy**

In 2011, Wickman compiled a list of the top adapted authors in Hollywood as part of *Slate's Culture Blog*. William Shakespeare was credited as a writer in 831 films while the next most credited writer was Anton Chekhov with 320, and then Charles Dickens with 300. The number of films that adapted the works of Shakespeare was more than double that of Chekhov's and according to the Internet Movie Database in 2017, the number of films that credited Shakespeare now exceeds 1,250. In addition to film, many of Shakespeare's plays have been adapted into various mediums, including graphic novels, operas, ballets, television series, etc. According to Daws (1956), "the fact that the lines of Shakespeare are much quoted can become pleasant reality as students discover the original source of statements such as, 'Parting is such sweet sorrow,' 'It's Greek to me,' and many other expressions they use daily" (p. 333). Students will not only develop an appreciation of the exciting characters and themes of his works, but will also have opportunities of understanding his historical significance and impact on the

English language and influence in modern day literature or media. According to one teacher:

*I think that looking at Shakespeare as an example of the evolution of the English language is a very useful examination of multi-literacies. Students have, at their fingertips, all of the information known to man, and can use it to research word origins, and multiple meanings for individual words and expressions. There are texts which have been 'translated' into modern English, paired with what we consider to be the original texts which allow students to see how our language has changed over the last 400 years. Considering the speed with which new language norms seem to be invented and created, this might allow students to build stronger cases for the expressions that they use in their daily communication, whether verbal or written.*

In Breitsprecher's study (2009), each teacher participant, with between one and over twenty years of experience "used a variety of versions, including print and film" (p. 47). Likewise, many teachers in this study also commented on using multiple versions or formats in their classrooms:

*Being dramatic texts, they obviously lend themselves to auditory, visual, and linguistic modalities. In the fact that they are difficult texts to read (poetic language and structure, archaisms, etc.), they provide students with rich opportunity to struggle through meaning.*

*With the availability of graphic novel versions of Shakespeare as well as the proliferation of on-line resources dedicated to the spread of his "wisdom," the opportunities to teach multiliteracies while also teaching Shakespeare have*

*increased.*

*It has so many different forms of text that one might use to compare and contrast expressions, strengths and weaknesses of various forms of media, how certain texts convey information and 'truths' that others don't, how certain texts connect to different audiences in different ways and how we use different sets of skills to read each text (e.g. paintings, poetry, first quarto vs. folio, film, advertisements, cartoons, etc...).*

### **3. Shakespeare Lesson/Unit Planning**

#### **a) Teaching Shakespearean Drama in 10-1**

In the current Alberta Education Senior High ELA Program of Studies, the teacher has the choice between teaching a modern play or a Shakespearean drama in English 10-1. Although it is not a mandated requirement, 9 out of the 10 teachers I interviewed stated that they chose to teach the Shakespearean play over a modern one. Of those that opted to teach the Shakespearean play, many believed that this would be an appropriate time to introduce the history and context of the Renaissance, including biographical information of the playwright; this is also a great opportunity to examine the language of Shakespeare that would prepare them for the required Shakespearean component taught in 20-1 and 30-1:

*I like to expose them to the language and style before a more in-depth study in 20-1.*

*I would also say that there does seem to be a sense among teachers – which I share – that teaching Shakespeare in Grade 10 helps them achieve greater success with that dimension of the Program of Studies in subsequent years.*

However, due to the focus on literacy and literary composition, some teachers merely provide a glimpse or a brief exposure to a Shakespearean text; they will introduce his sonnets, explicate key passages from various plays, or analyze a film adaptation of a play (alongside multimedia and visual literacy):

*I don't necessarily have students read the whole play (the 2004 film has gone a long way in helping with that)*

*I did not teach a whole Shakespearean play. I did an introduction to Shakespeare, featuring his sonnets as well as excerpts from his historical plays, his tragedies, and comedies.*

Three of the teachers mentioned specifically that they taught *Romeo and Juliet* in their English 10-1 classes. When I asked them why they chose this text, one teacher said:

*Usually...peer pressure*

When this teacher joined his or her specific school, there was already a policy in place in which each academic grade 10 English class would study a Shakespearean play. Most of the English departments had copies of *Romeo and Juliet*, which naturally became the text of choice, as suggested by another teacher:

*Usually Romeo and Juliet, often because it was tradition in the schools I taught in.*

For first year teachers, coming into a brand new school find lesson planning becomes overwhelming, so many would default to the traditions of the school. Also, as each educator has teaching experience with this play, there are many resources, materials, and collaborative opportunities for those who are new to the profession. When it comes to Alberta Distance Learning Schools, *Romeo and Juliet* is the only module available,



which inadvertently makes this text mandatory for students to study:

*Romeo and Juliet. Because it is part of the modular course I teach.*

In a study of popular texts taught in English 30-1, Altmann et al (1998) surveyed high school English teachers in a large urban centre and found that the most popular play taught was *Romeo and Juliet*. A decade later Mackey et al. conducted a similar survey and found the same results. The results of the “Top Ten Plays in 2006” (2006, p. 35), show that seven of them were dramas written by William Shakespeare. Thus, “*Romeo and Juliet*, and the various Shakespeare plays combine for a total of 75%” (Mackey et al, 2006, p. 38). What was also interesting to note was the fact that “teachers provided a total of 171 citations of film titles...41 movie citations were films of Shakespeare plays” (p. 38). Noting the similarity of these findings to the results of the earlier study, Mackey et al. (2006) concluded that “elements of this canon are deeply established” (p. 51).

#### **b) Teaching Shakespearean Drama in 20-1 and 30-1**

Since Shakespeare is the only required author in ELA 20-1 and ELA 30-1, many English teachers feel that exposure to his poetic language and works would allow students to be more successful in the higher grade level courses. In 1961, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* were the only two Shakespearean play options for English 30. Based on the teachers I interviewed, *Macbeth* is still the most popular Shakespearean text studied in English 20-1 and *Hamlet* is still very popular in English 30-1:

*Macbeth/Hamlet. Those are the texts available to me in my schools.*

*I'd have to say that throughout my career, I've taught the big three (Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth and Hamlet) the most, although I have taught other plays at all three grade levels. I'd like to say that I teach those three plays because they are*

*the greatest plays, are also the most accessible.*

In comparison to other plays, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* have been traditionally taught in high school classrooms; thus, Alberta teachers have greater access to these materials. Due to the increasing demands of school district and administrative initiatives, differentiated student needs, successful standardized assessment results, many teachers feel the increasing challenge of having the time to create brand new resources:

*I teach [Macbeth and Hamlet] because I have resources developed for them (i.e. the modules). If I choose a different play, I would need to create a new module, which would be a large task.*

*It's probably that simple for many of us. Quite simply, I know those three plays backwards and forwards and feel that I bring knowledge and passion to bear when I work with them with students. But let's also be honest, I also know them well enough that my preparation is relatively minimal. No small thing when you are teaching 150-200 kids a term.*

However, more recently, Shakespeare's *Othello* has also become quite popular in the Alberta Senior High School ELA classroom. Many teachers emphasize how the delivery time of instruction impacts their choice of text, but they also find that students can easily relate to the themes of racism and the effects of a paranoid mind:

*Othello – It's shorter than Hamlet. (Perhaps not the most valid reason.) The students love and hate Iago. They are completely perplexed by Othello's lack of reason; we have some lovely discussions about reason and proof and what is real.*

*Also, the moral issues raised in it to some extent are relevant to current reality,*

*especially considering the increasing narcissistic trends and sense of entitlement. Othello, I believe, is the most relevant of Shakespearean plays, dealing with jealousy as a universal human experience. Again, post-colonial and racial issues can be brought up and discussed with students, as well as moral issues concerning honesty, honour, reputation, etc.*

**c) Influence of English 30-1 Diploma Exam on Practices and Assessment**

When asked to what extent the Alberta English 30-1 Standardized Diploma Exam influenced their approaches to teaching Shakespeare, 6 out of 10 teacher participants said that the exam had a significant impact on how they planned their unit. The Diploma is divided into two components: a written exam and reading comprehension multiple choice exam. In the written exam, students are given a critical/analytical thematic essay question in which they have the ability to choose a text studied in English 30-1 to respond to; the reading comprehension exam “feature[s] discrete questions on excerpts from Shakespeare's works” (Ourdeva-Balinska, 2016, p. 335), along with passages from other genres. Shakespearean texts such as *Hamlet* and *Othello* are often texts chosen by students for their written exam, which suggests that of all the texts taught in English 30-1, these plays obviously made a lasting impression on them and they were able to internalize and make a connection between both the texts and topic. However, as some students associate Shakespeare with “high culture” and “intellect,” the choice to write on a Shakespearean text may merely be to impress the examiner and attempt to be seen as a “strong English student.” In terms of the reading comprehension portion of the diploma exam, students have to closely examine a passage for context, interpreting its language and style to demonstrate an understanding of its meaning, which greatly

influence the teachers in my study in their instructional approaches in ELA 30-1:

*I teach mostly for reading comprehension. A lot of emphasis is placed on paraphrasing and summarizing as well as vocabulary building.*

*The modules are designed to reflect and prepare the students for the diploma exam.*

*I teach it with a specific essay topic in mind that can later be used on the diploma exam.*

According to Irish, (2011) teachers who choose not to organize their units with the diploma exam mind believe that pressure to achieve the highest attainment grades “often pushes teachers into providing a reactionary, monological experience of Shakespeare for their students, protesting that the English curriculum does not allow time for play and the English classroom does not allow space for play” (p. 7). One of my teacher participants said the following:

*[The exam] does not [influence me], except when I'm feeling pressured for time.*

*If I am, I will lean heavily on reading comprehension approaches instead of the language and the ideas of the play.*

Nonetheless, these teachers believe that the curricular outcomes, which include the development of reading and writing skills, and the appreciation for the various literary conventions, would naturally prepare students for any standardized assessment: the students would theoretically apply the skills they have learned throughout the last 13 years of formal ELA education:

*I teach the curriculum, not the exam. The exam is a fact of life. I provide the curriculum and that usually suffices to create quality results.*

*It doesn't, but that's mostly because I really enjoy teaching Shakespeare, and reading it and talking about it, so for me, the exam preparation takes care of itself in the assessment I do.*

**d) Is the Shakespeare Reading Comprehension Portion of the Diploma Exam Still Valid?**

As grade twelve students have the option to decide which text to use on the essay section of the diploma exam, the only portion of the exam to demonstrate their accountability for studying a Shakespearean play is the reading comprehension part of the exam. Many of these passages are excerpts from Shakespearean histories, rather than his tragedies which tend to be taught almost exclusively from ELA 10-1 to ELA 30-1. When asked if they still believed in the validity of this exam, these teachers stated the following:

*I think that the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage is still very valid, because it asks students to stretch beyond their normal means of communication and understanding to develop an appreciation for the evolution of the English language. I've found that most passages don't contain individual words which are unknown or unfamiliar to students, but the construction of the phrases and the specific word choices force students to go beyond their usual readings of passages.*

*Well, it's valid in the sense that every grade twelve student studied Shakespeare and should have some ability to read a text they haven't seen.*

And yet, some teachers wonder whether spending four weeks in a semester to answer 10-14 questions on a diploma exam is worth the time a play takes when there are other pressing matters to attend to in the classroom:

*I don't think it is. Reading Shakespeare requires specific reading comprehension skills that might not necessarily reflect current needs for reading comprehension. I think that students who have special interests in reading English literature of earlier periods could benefit from exposure to Shakespeare in high school, but I see him more of an author appropriate for university level reading than high school.*

#### **4. Approaches and Strategies to Teaching Shakespeare in the Classroom**

As suggested by Daws (1956), “I would not be justified in using my time or that of my students if the experience could not be an enjoyable and meaningful one for both of us” (p. 332). Traditional teaching methods in which students are assigned reading and quizzes lead to their belief that “only the teacher is smart enough to understand Shakespeare and that if they wait long enough, the teacher will tell them what the words mean” (Spangler, 2009, p. 130). Similar to Spangler (2009), Turchi and Thompson (2013) believe that teachers should “throw out the study guides that try to be all encompassing and to replace them with evocative questions based on limited performances, selected scenes, and competing interpretations” (35). After interviewing my teacher participants, I have compiled a list of methods, which they find meaningful and effective, as well as linked to curriculum outcomes.

##### **a) Comparisons of Adaptations/ Creation of New Adaptations**

Turchi & Thompson (2013) argue that “because of the emphasis on digital literacy in the Common Core, students should be accessing and analyzing what is available on film and the Internet ... and participating in dialogues about – and even creating their own –

performances, interpretations, adaptations. (p. 36). Since Shakespeare's plays were written with the intention of being performed on stage, it is imperative that students understand the interplay between text and form: to appreciate each aspect considered in order to create a production. As suggested by Spangler (2009), "Shakespeare's plays must be experienced as they were intended – produced by actors on a stage and watched by an audience" (p. 131). Many of the teachers that I interviewed would often show various film adaptations and ask students to critique the effectiveness in the way the director chose to portray certain scenes from the play; this way, they not only were able to understand the Shakespearean text, but the visual components that aided in its expression:

*I like to do comparisons between the text we're reading and other media versions (A Simple Plan for Macbeth, the Branagh Othello film, or Baz Luhrmann's Romeo & Juliet when I teach that play) I find that a comparison of different forms of the stories is useful, and I couple that with detailed study of 3 or 4 key passages for each play.*

*We often watch the film version (or at least excerpts) of whichever play we're studying, and we compare our impressions of the characters at the end of the play versus the end of the film.*

Similar to Spangler (2009), who suggested that "After watching several different performances of the same scene...students can reference the written text to discuss various 'readings,' 'interpretations,' or visions of different directors as well as of the playwright" (p. 132), some teachers take this activity a step further and ask students to create their own versions along with a detailed explanation of their choices:

*I used to ask students to create director's notes or to create a film adaptation of particular scenes. Lately, I have also asked students to create graphic novel versions or picture book versions of Shakespearean texts, but I have my reservations about these activities.*

*In the past I have had students create storyboards for certain scenes, and work with staging and blocking in others.*

Irish (2011) continues to reinforce the idea that “studying Shakespeare [should] be an active, collaborative process” (p. 9), between teachers and their students. It is important for teachers to take risks which come from “engaging the dialogic imagination of students/actors in relation to the dynamic, unstable lay text before them in order to create personal meaning” (Irish, 2011, p. 7). As students begin to recognize the universal themes in Shakespeare’s works, many of them are able to re-create “real-life” scenarios and craft a modernized version of his tales:

*I have created personal response to text assignments that transport the characters to modern times, for example, students had to write a cover letter and a resume for Iago's application for the position of lieutenant. They had to write a news report about the disaster that the King of Naples suffered on his way back from his daughter's wedding and his subsequent disappearance. Students have had to write Miranda's or Ferdinand's journals.*

## **b) Explication of Key Passages**

Every teacher that I interviewed agreed that the best way to incorporate and develop close reading strategies is through the use of Shakespearean passages. They believe that students are responsible for understanding the context of the passages, being able



to explain the meaning behind them, as well as the poetic devices used to create such meaning. Turchi & Thompson (2013) argue that “a student who can successfully deconstruct individual lines after extended engagement with them will have a richer understanding of the play and will have reinforced the importance of context clues” (p. 35). This activity might appear to be more teacher-directed at first, but students first needed to be guided in terms of how to “read” the passage and find clues in which deconstruct ideas and meaning. After that, they should be able to develop a confidence in reading and interpreting Shakespearean texts independently. Turchi & Thompson (2013) state that “educators should encourage and enable students to approach the text with a critical eye...to wonder about the purpose of the speech, the intention of the speaker, and his role in the play” (p. 35), a belief of many of the teacher participants who have encouraged close reading strategies as well:

*I like to do a detailed analysis of at least 3 key passages, with one of them being an exercise in annotation.*

*[Students develop] the close reading of the text with the help of sidebar notes and “No Fear Shakespeare” [as well as] paraphrasing and summarizing sections of the text.*

*[Students develop] reading comprehensions strategies (chunking, finding subjects - verbs, using reference material to clarify allusion, annotation, visualization or movement, paraphrase, etc.)*

As reflected by Balinska-Ourdeva et al. (2016), teachers “are advocating for attentive reading which encourages critical reflexivity that strives for deliberate and careful examinations of how ‘we speak [texts]’ and how ‘we mean by them’” (p. 341-342).

### c) Acting/Oral Presentations

A majority of the teachers interviewed stated that they read the Shakespearean plays aloud in class with their students. They believe that since the plays were written to be performed, it was important not only to discuss the message in the print text, but also the ways in which an audience would react. In addition to reading aloud, creating movement was equally important to discuss as the plays themselves lacked stage directions – this empowered students to articulate how they would move as they read the lines aloud:

*The entire text is read aloud, so that students can hear the rhythm and cadence and feel the language as they are exposed to the texts.*

Turchi & Thompson (2013) argue the significance of providing students with the opportunity to bring a character to life:

if students read carefully selected excerpts, and read again, and read aloud, and stand up and attempt to envision not only a character but also how that character moves in a scene, and what he or she says and why, they will have far more insight and understanding than if they are passive listeners, skimming through the story. (p. 34)

To understand that the print text was one of the many components needed in creating a lavish production, many teachers developed projects that allowed students to re-contextualize the play – to design their own sets, costumes, props, etc.:

*I like students to create adaptations of Shakespearean plays set in non-western settings.*

*I've had students choose to act out a scene in pantomime, while others have*

*created life-size "statues" of characters in order to show a scene.*

*I've had students work in groups to: pitch a modern version, develop director's notebooks, use a lit circle approach to explore a related topic (ex. tension between public and private life), paraphrase passages.*

#### **d) Historical/Cultural Research**

According to Fenwick & Parsons (1996), "when we choose Shakespeare as part of the curriculum, students often end up studying The Globe Theatre, the historic context of the particular play under study, the conceits of middle English and the historic context of Renaissance English drama." (p. 25). According to the Alberta Education High School ELA Program of Studies, "'context' includes any element present in a communication situation that influences the creation and interpretation of text" and therefore "this program of studies emphasizes the importance of context, including purpose, audience and situation, in the student's engagement with and creation of text" (p. 4). Included in the study of text, students are also required to consider the time and place in which a piece was written, as "constraints of time and space and issues of gender and culture, will affect the production of text" (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 4). When asked why and how they incorporated historical context in their Shakespeare unit, the teachers said the following:

*It is a way to let them test to what extent values from one culture and historical period can be translated into another culture and historical setting.*

*Contextual research assignments [allow students to] research on particular aspects that are culturally specific or historically outdated.*

For those who choose to teach a Shakespearean play in English 10-1, historical

research is often incorporated into their unit. Teachers believe that although students have heard of the name William Shakespeare and some titles of his works, they might have had little exposure to the Renaissance and influences upon his writing. In comparison to English 20-1 and 30-1, who tend to only reserve time to focus on the study the plays themselves, grade 10 teachers feel the responsibility in providing the context behind the content, form, and ways to 'read' the language in order for students to be more successful in high level academic high school English Language Arts courses.

**e) Written Responses/Discussions**

In addition to the creative projects done in class that allow student to modernize or perform scenes from the play studied, many of the teachers will ask students to complete a written response as form of a culminating assessment. Students would be asked to do the following:

*There is always a Critical/Analytical Response to Text [Essay] at the end of the unit.*

In this case, students would be given a thematic essay topic in which they need to examine a character's response to a particular type of conflict, and relate their interpretation of the text and topic to the human condition. This aligns with Alberta Education ELA learning outcomes "when responding to literature personally, critically and creatively, students reflect upon the human condition and develop and refine their understandings of themselves as human beings" (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 4). Another teacher suggested the following:

*Independently, students write about aspects of the text, have discussions about*

*characters, actions, theme, etc. [and answer] multiple choice questions.*

*Of course, one of the most common activities are the reading comprehension multiple choice tests. I hate them, but the students need the exposure in hopes that this helps them do better on the diploma exams.*

Again, the influence of the diploma exam is strong as many teachers also include a set of reading comprehension questions for students to complete as a way to prepare them for the multiple choice portion of the provincial standardized exam.

## **5. What to Teach in the Place of Shakespeare?**

### **a) Uncertain**

According to Loomba & Orkin (1998), the works of Shakespeare reinforced “highly conservative ways [continuously]... endorsing existing racial, gender and other hierarchies” (p. 1). However when asked if there was another author who was as complex and challenging enough, and yet relatable, to students, three teachers expressed their uncertainty:

*I don't know if we have an equivalent to Shakespeare, either inside or outside the literary canon.*

*For plays, however, I'm not sure that there is someone whose works are complex enough for solid academic study but still accessible enough that students who struggle with the English language are still able to understand, at least on a superficial level, the language and content.*

*Again, I'm not sure. I would probably still do some Shakespeare – I enjoy teaching it in some of my classes.*

**b) No Equivalence**

Four teachers adamantly expressed that there was no equivalent in terms of an author who addressed the following essential aspects of the English language arts curriculum: “His purposes were important, his themes were universal, his ideas were clear, his characters were multitudinous, and his philosophy was moral” (Burton as cited in Mersereau, 1963, p. 12). Many of the teachers admitted that even if Shakespeare were no longer a required author, that they would somehow find a way to introduce his works into the classroom. They each agreed that it was not necessarily important to only focus on writers of the past, but to balance the voices and opinions in terms of gender, culture, race, and place. It would be a challenge for students to appreciate those who are responding against Shakespeare if they did not read any Shakespeare in the first place:

*I would still teach it. Not required does not mean not taught. I would still attempt to teach diverse texts from diverse places.*

*I'd still likely hit on some Shakespeare, though would also like to explore other genres and cultural perspectives on life... So much depends on the students... and what in my professional judgment is most important to offer them.*

*I think that the teaching of Shakespeare is not done for the exclusion of diverse perspectives. If we got rid of everything old, everything boring, everything challenging, and everything western we would just make new texts boring from other countries. We should always try and balance new and old, fresh and stale.*

As stated in the Alberta Education Program of Studies (2003), “it is expected that a significant proportion of texts that students study will be Canadian texts. The required

minimum proportion of Canadian texts studied is one third of all texts studied in each course” (p. 10). Thus, if a teacher spends four to five weeks (out of a 20 week semester), one-quarter of the literature studied would be devoted to a Shakespearean study. If that unit becomes the main focus of term, then some students might continue to over-value Shakespeare as a writer over other authors:

*There is not really an equivalent, but I would have the time to teach more relevant and contemporary forms, such as modern plays in a Canadian context, popular culture, perhaps a TV series.*

### **c) Other Options**

When asked which authors they would teach alongside Shakespeare, that is, if they had the time to prepare these units, many of the teachers wanted to include *multicultural and postcolonial* literature. To Fenwick & Parsons (1996), Shakespeare’s plays “include some of the finest language, examples of poetry, universal themes of humanity, play structure and so on that can be found in any literature throughout the world” (p. 24), and that “we cannot justify in our own heads the almost exclusive use of one playwright – regardless of who that playwright is” (p. 26).

It will also be significant to engage in dialogue with the class, not just read and dissect the meaning behind the works of Shakespeare’s plays, but to also examine why his plays are continuously being taught as well. Balinska-Ourdeva et al. (2016) believe that “we have the opportunity to engage students in an ongoing conversation about the reproduction and contestation of social orders, cultural capital, and ideological investments that define what is valuable and exemplary enough to endure as a culture legacy in the future” (p. 346). This will allow students to not only examine ‘the what’ but

'the why' certain pieces of literature become timeless.

Irish (2011) suggests that “many teachers want to be revolutionary risk-takers but fall into the role of reactionary knowledge-givers, creating an internal tension and anxiety because, inside, we all know we don't know it all” (p. 8), and thus if teachers continue to engage students in critical thinking and dialogue, “Students who are engaged in metacognition recognize the requirements of the task at hand, reflect on the strategies and skills they may employ, appraise their strengths and weaknesses... and modify subsequent strategies” (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 2).

#### **d) The Inclusion of Multi-Cultural/Non-Eurocentric Perspectives**

Alberta Education published lists of suggested literature titles recommended by committees of readers on the basis of their literary merit and suitability for teaching. The last published list appeared in 2005, so there are limited numbers of texts included that would now be considered as contemporary or multicultural and many titles remain the same as in previous versions of the high school list. Apart from the mandatory Shakespeare Play component, Alberta Education encourages ELA teachers to include a variety of voices and perspectives in the classroom. Teachers, of course, are expected to consider the communities in which they teach, the pedagogical needs of the students, and school initiatives in their planning. The teachers that I interviewed noted that they try to include multicultural voices in the literature they use in the classroom, but feel that do not include as much as they should. Many cite the limited resources they have access to and the logistics of getting a hold of enough copies for large classes to work with:

*I do my best to include multicultural and non-Eurocentric texts in my class, but I*



*struggle with trying to find resources. Most of my non-Eurocentric texts are short stories and poems, because those are much easier to find and bring in than entire class sets of novels or plays.*

*I try to include multicultural texts as my personal ambition is to teach texts that come from the cultures of the students in my classes.*

*I am lucky that I have the opportunity to teach the Works in Translations course of the IB program as it allows me to introduce texts from different cultures and non-Eurocentric perspectives, but the requirements for teaching Canadian literature I find limiting in this respect.*

Unlike the Alberta Program of Studies, the International Baccalaureate English Literature program includes a mandatory study of Works in Translation to encourage global perspectives. In the Alberta classroom, major novels, plays, and films are often originally written in English and Euro-centric. Some poetry and short stories might be set in a different culture, but this is still quite minimal. The other issues teachers mentioned is the need to be sensitive in their choice of multicultural texts so as not to reinforce certain cultural stereotypes:

*As much as I possibly can, while at the same time giving credence to the craft and challenge of texts regardless of origin. The real challenge is to find the texts as it takes time and effort to locate exemplars from more remote and less Eurocentric perspectives of the world, particular if one wants to avoid a skewed representation of that perspective.*

The responses in these teacher interviews provided me with insight into the overwhelming support for the continued instruction of Shakespeare's works in the

Alberta High School English Language Arts curriculum. The next chapter will discuss the further implications of this study.

## **Chapter Five: Summary of Findings and Limitations of Research**

Based on the interviews that I conducted with my participants, I found there was an overwhelming agreement that the study of the Shakespearean play should continue to be taught in the Alberta Senior High School English Language Arts Program of Studies. Teachers believe that the only way to make this unit meaningful to students is by being engaged with both the text and form; students should be encouraged to act out, produce scenes from the play, or re-create modernized versions of the texts that they study. Shakespearean texts are also seen as an important source to show the evolution of language and the appreciation of his craft would also allow students to be more cognizant of their own styles of writing.

First year teachers or newer teachers to the profession prefer to include Shakespeare, as many of them have taken a Shakespeare Literature course in their postsecondary studies, and feel that they have the confidence and materials needed to approach and prepare the unit. In comparison to ELA teachers in 1996 who spent 7-8 weeks teaching a Shakespearean Play, more experienced teachers have reduced the number of lessons to between 3-4 weeks in the hopes of including multicultural and or non-Eurocentric options. Still, although many teachers say they want to include more modern texts and perspectives, they see logistic challenges in finding resources or enough copies of the texts to share with their students. Thus, many of the multicultural texts used at this point are associated with genres of poetry and short stories.

Many teachers pointed to the impact of the Alberta Education diploma exam in affecting their approaches to teaching the Shakespearean Play. Although it is not a

requirement in ELA 10-1, a vast majority of teachers chose to expose their students to the context – his life and times – along with a detailed study of his work to prepare them for the Shakespearean studies in higher-level grades. English 20-1 teachers will continue to focus on the analysis of Shakespearean language and universal themes. English 30-1 teachers will develop their units around reading comprehension and ensure that their students are able to answer multiple-choice questions in regards to Shakespearean passages.

Nonetheless, even though the mandatory component of teaching a Shakespearean Play in English 20-1 and 30-1 will (or may be) removed upon the release of the new curriculum in 2022, each teacher agreed that they would still expose their students to his works. They believe that it would be unlikely for a student to graduate from an academic ELA course without studying at least one Shakespearean play; they might not study three plays consecutively, but they certainly would study either his poetry or one drama in great detail. Over the years (and more recently), this topic still has relevance, as suggested by a 2016 survey of 25,000 Albertans reviewing the current Kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum. Based on the results of this survey French's (2017) article in *The Edmonton Journal*, quoted from the report that "there exists a strong desire for the removal of Shakespeare as a required author" (Retrieved April 13, 2017) and a push towards literacy and numeracy. As a rebuttal to this article, *Edmonton Journal* columnist, Simons (2017) reveals that "of the 25,000 people who completed the survey, 60 added their own comments about Shakespeare [specifically]. Of those, [only] 50 called for the removal of Shakespeare from the curriculum" (Retrieved April 15, 2017), which nevertheless reduced the surveyed population – of

those who were adamant of the removal of Shakespeare as the only required author – to 0.2%. Participants of this Alberta Education survey consisted of members from the public, teachers, and students. There was quite a public backlash to the insinuation of Shakespeare’s removal, which became a topic of discussion over social media, in which a larger percentage commented on the importance of keeping the study of Shakespeare’s work in the curriculum. The strong feelings against teaching Shakespeare often stem from individuals who remember reading and explicating passage over and over again. However, many of the participants of this study suggests that since his plays were meant to be performed, that it is imperative for students to appreciate the significant theatrical components which inform the deeper meaning of each dramatic work.

Although the study of a Shakespearean play allows for students to engage in all five of Alberta’s Senior High English Language Arts *General Outcomes* and all six Language Arts strands, teachers should not merely select a Shakespearean play out of comfort or familiarity. Eaglestone (2000) suggests that “a person who studied English and has become a teacher often teaches the texts she or he was taught, in part because she or he was taught that these texts were most important” (p. 56). Even though Shakespeare is the number one most adapted author in the English language and that there is an abundance of teaching resources of Shakespearean texts for teachers to access, it is important that educators feel confident in taking risks and bringing in literature that balances different voices and perspectives in the classroom. The only way that teachers can continually have new resources and materials for literature is for teachers to continually teach new texts. What is often posed as a

challenge for many teachers includes the selection of multicultural or non-Eurocentric texts. Abdul-Jabbar (2015) concluded that it is imperative to include the following three stages when implementing multicultural texts to in the classroom: collaborative learning, recreating an invented reality, and rewriting for aesthetics (p. 222). It is significant for teachers to find texts that include multiple voices, rather than simply dominant ones, of many different cultures. Teachers need to be able to challenge a student's own pre-conceived notions about certain people and places: to allow them to recognize their own biases. As this becomes a collaborative learning environment, this will provide educators with the opportunity to create a safe place for students to engage, ask questions, investigate: develop cultural sensitivities and understanding.

Obviously, my research has its limitations, as I was only able to interview ten participants; however, all ten teachers worked for the same district, based within a large urban centre in Alberta, and thus should proportionately represent teachers of large urban centres in the province. Unfortunately, I was unable to find participants from the rural settings of the province and my research findings are skewed towards teacher experiences in diverse, more multicultural, classrooms. If I were to take this research future, I would try to interview a broader range of teachers from various teaching contexts. I would also interview students about their experiences learning Shakespeare and see if their responses are similar to those of the teachers that I interviewed. Alberta Education is aiming to implement a new Senior High curriculum in 2022, so hopefully they will consider my research findings to aid in their revision process.

I certainly am not suggesting the idea of the complete abandonment of teaching the Shakespearean play in high school English Language Arts; however, Alberta High

School English teachers should begin to shift their focus of literature from the literary canon to providing alternative and diverse perspectives. Literature not only is an essential way of providing students with exposure to different landscapes and cultures, but also allows them to empathize and recognize how literature ultimately explores depths of the human condition.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Research Letter

November 01, 2014

To whom it may concern:

William Shakespeare continues to be the only required author in the Alberta High School English Language Arts 20-1 and 30-1 Program of Studies. As a result, the reading comprehension portion of the English 30-1 diploma exam also consists of 12-14 multiple-choice questions corresponding to a Shakespeare passage. Due to the changing demographic of the English Language Arts classroom and expansion of twenty-first century literacies, in what ways does Shakespeare still relevant in the curriculum? You are invited to participate in a research project about Shakespeare in the twenty-first century English Language Arts classroom. In order to determine your views, you are asked to volunteer to participate in an interview (in person, by phone or survey).

This project, entitled *Shakespeare in the Twenty-first Century*, will gather feedback from teachers of high school English Language Arts in Alberta in three areas:

- 1) The relevance of studying Shakespeare in high school English Language Arts
- 2) The experience (rewards and challenges) and approach of teaching Shakespeare in the classroom
- 3) Recommendations if Shakespeare is no longer required in the curriculum

The interview/survey will be scheduled at a time and place of your convenience prior to March 31, 2015. This will take approximately 45 minutes. With your permission, I will contact you either by phone or e-mail to schedule the interview session or survey. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. Once the interview has been transcribed, the interviewee will be sent the transcript to verify, change, or clarify his or her responses. If you choose the survey option, a questionnaire with the same interview questions will be sent to you by e-mail and a copy of responses will be sent to our for verification. During the interview/survey, you may choose to opt out on answering any of the questions at any time.

The questions in the interview/survey are:

### Demographics

- a. What is your age?
- b. What is your gender?
- c. How many years have you been teaching High school English Language Arts in Alberta?
- d. Which high school English Language Arts classes have you taught or currently teach?
- e. Describe your school context

### Teaching Philosophy

- a. Discuss your rationale for continuing to teach Shakespeare in the classroom?
- b. Considering the demographical changes in the English Language Arts classroom climate, in what ways do teachers and students in your school still find the works of Shakespeare to be relevant?
- c. In what ways can the study of Shakespeare be used to support the expansion of multi-literacies and multimodal texts in the high school English Language Arts classroom?
- d. To what extent do you believe that the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage in the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is still valid?
- e. If Shakespeare was no longer a required author in English 20-1 and English 30-1, would you continue to teach his works? What would you teach in his place?

### Lesson/Unit Planning

- a. Which Shakespearean plays do you often teach in your English 20-1 and 30-1 classes? Why?
- b. Do you teach a Shakespearean play to your English 10-1 class? Why or why not?
- c. To what extent does the English 30-1 diploma exam influence your approach to teaching Shakespeare?

### Teaching Practice

- a. What effective strategies do you use to teach Shakespeare?
- b. Describe the classroom activities or assignments you use to assess the understanding of Shakespearean texts.
- c. To what extent are you able to include multicultural texts and non-Eurocentric perspectives in the classroom?

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you are free to opt out or withdraw from the study at any time. The relevant information will then be destroyed and will not be used to determine the research findings. Withdrawal from the study at any time will result in any consequences and those who decide to participate will not be revealed to your school principal.

Choosing whether or not to participate in this study is a personal and private matter. Other participants will not be provided with your decision. During the analysis of the data, your identity will remain anonymous – pseudonyms will be used to identify the multiply responses. Participants will be advised in regards to the importance of maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of other participants, and not to reveal the identities of the participants outside of the group. All documents will be handled by the researcher and stored in a secure location.

The data will be used to complete a thesis that will be submitted to the University of Alberta in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's Degree in Education and in research articles and presentations.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact us either by phone or e-mail.

Thank you,

Researcher:

Stephanie Chow (Master's student)

Department of Secondary Education, 551 Education South, University of Alberta,  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada      Tel. 780-492-3674      Email: [sgchow@ualberta.ca](mailto:sgchow@ualberta.ca)

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Ingrid Johnston (professor)

Department of Secondary Education, 630 Education South, University of Alberta,  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada,      Tel. 780-492-5320      Email:  
[ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca](mailto:ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca)

**The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.**

## Appendix B: Consent Form

### Teaching Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century

**Research Investigator:**

STEPHANIE CHOW

DEPARTMENT OF  
SECONDARY EDUCATION  
551 EDUCATION SOUTH  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2G5  
E-mail: sgchow@ualberta.ca  
Telephone: 780-492-3674

**Supervisor:**

INGRID JOHNSTON

DEPARTMENT OF  
SECONDARY EDUCATION  
630 EDUCATION SOUTH  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2G5  
E-mail: ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca  
Telephone: 780-492-5320

*Background*

- You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an Alberta high school English Language Arts teacher
- I either received your contact information through a colleague or directly made contact with you regarding the study
- The results of this study will be used in support of my Master's thesis

*Purpose*

This project will gather feedback from teachers of high school English Language Arts in Alberta in three areas:

- The relevancy of studying Shakespeare in high school English Language Arts.
- The experience (rewards and challenges) and approach of teaching Shakespeare in the classroom.
- Recommendations if Shakespeare is no longer required in the curriculum.

### Study Procedures

You will be asked to participate in an interview/survey. You have the right to refuse to answer a question and continue with the interview at any time. The questions are:

#### Demographics

- a. What is your age?
- b. What is your gender?
- c. How many years have you been teaching High school English Language Arts in Alberta?
- d. Which high school English Language Arts classes have you taught or currently teach?
- e. Describe your school context

#### Teaching Philosophy

- a. Discuss your rationale for continuing to teach Shakespeare in the classroom?
- b. Considering the demographical changes in the English Language Arts classroom climate, in what ways do teachers and students in your school still find the works of Shakespeare to be relevant?
- c. In what ways can the study of Shakespeare be used to support the expansion of multi-literacies and multimodal texts in the high school English Language Arts classroom?
- d. To what extent do you believe that the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage in the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is still valid?

#### Lesson/Unit Planning

- a. Which Shakespearean plays do you often teach in your English 20-1 and 30-1 classes? Why?
- b. Do you teach a Shakespearean play to your English 10-1 class? Why or why not?
- c. To what extent does the English 30-1 diploma exam influence your approach to teaching Shakespeare?

#### Teaching Practice

- a. What effective strategies do you use to teach Shakespeare?
- b. Describe the classroom activities or assignments you use to assess the understanding of Shakespearean texts.
- c. To what extent are you able to include multicultural texts and non-Eurocentric perspectives in the classroom?



The 45 minute interview will be recorded and its transcript sent to you by e-mail. You shall have the opportunity to respond to or clarify points in the summary. (Data will be validated by you as a participant and kept on file for a period of 5 years). If you choose to answer the questions in survey form, you will be sent a copy of your responses by e-mail.

### Benefits

- The purpose of this study is to interview high school English teachers about their experiences teaching Shakespeare in their classrooms and whether they continue to see value in teaching the works of Shakespeare in the Alberta English Language Arts curriculum.
- Shakespeare is a required author in the Alberta Education Program of Studies for English Language Arts 20-1 and 30-1, and thus the public have a vested interest in this topic.
- Due to the changes in the demographics in the Alberta English Language classroom, I would like to investigate whether the works of Shakespeare are still seen as valid/relevant and whether there are other authors that could potentially be taught in his place.

### Risk

- There may be risks to being in this study that are not known. If we learn anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, I will tell you right away.
- Participants might feel psychologically or emotionally stressed, demeaned, embarrassed, worried, anxious, scared or distressed, as he or she might disclose experiences that are sensitive in nature.

### Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary.
- You are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.
- The interview/survey must be completed before June 2015, but you have the right to refuse to opt out from the interview at any time without penalty and any data you provide will be destroyed.

### Confidentiality & Anonymity

- You may be contacted by phone or e-mail for further clarification.
- All information will be treated confidentially. No one besides the researcher and research supervisor will know that you are participating in the study. All data are to be kept in a secure place for a minimum of 5 years following completion of thesis. Electronic data will be password protected or encrypted.

- Any references to your words will appear under a pseudonym and your identity will be protected and encrypted.
- There will be no consequences for being part of the study and your principal will not be notified about your participation.
- Data will be used to write reports and articles and improve curriculum development.
- Data will be used with your permission in future conference presentations or articles.
- The data will be used to complete a thesis that will be submitted to the University of Alberta in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's Degree in Education and in research articles and presentations.

### Further Information

The researcher will provide two copies of the letter and consent form, one to be signed and returned and one for the participants to keep for their own records.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:

Researcher:

Stephanie Chow (Master's student)

Department of Secondary Education, 551 Education South, University of Alberta,  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Tel. 780-492-3674, Email: [sgchow@ualberta.ca](mailto:sgchow@ualberta.ca)

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Ingrid Johnston (professor)

Department of Secondary Education, 630 Education South, University of Alberta,  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Tel. 780-492-5320, Email:  
[ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca](mailto:ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca)

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

---

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature

---

Date

---

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date

**The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.**

## **Appendix C: Interview Protocol**

### **Introduction:**

Hello. Thank you for NAME participating in the study entitled, *Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century*. I really appreciate you taking the time for this.

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of the study is to gather feedback from teachers of high school English Language Arts in Alberta in three areas:

- 1) The relevancy of studying Shakespeare in high school English Language Arts.
- 2) The experience (rewards and challenges) and approach of teaching Shakespeare in the classroom.
- 3) Recommendations if Shakespeare is no longer required in the curriculum.

The data will be used to complete a thesis that will be submitted to the University of Alberta in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Master's Degree in Education and in research articles and presentations.

### **Explanation of Procedure:**

Do you understand that:

- a) This interview will take approximately 45 minutes and you can refuse to answer a question and continue with the interview at any time.
- b) The interview will be tape recorded and then transcribed. You will be given two weeks to read the transcript to clarify or remove anything not to of your satisfaction.
- c) All information will be treated confidentially. No one besides the researcher and research supervisor will know that you are participating in the study.
- d) Any references to your words will appear under a pseudonym and your identity will be protected and encrypted.
- e) There will be no consequences to being part of the study and you principal will not be notified about my participation.
- f) The data will be used with your permission in future conference presentations or articles.

### **Agreement:**

Do you have any questions for me? If you need a bathroom break, please let me know and we can stop the tape-recorded and resume when you return.

### **Permission:**

Do you consent to being interviewed?

## **Interview Questions:**

### Demographics

- a. What is your age?
- b. What is your gender?
- c. How many years have you been teaching High school English Language Arts in Alberta?
- d. Which high school English Language Arts classes have you taught or currently teach?
- e. Describe your school context

### Teaching Philosophy

- a. Discuss your rationale for continuing to teach Shakespeare in the classroom?
- b. Considering the demographical changes in the English Language Arts classroom climate, in what ways do teachers and students in your school still find the works of Shakespeare to be relevant?
- c. In what ways can the study of Shakespeare be used to support the expansion of multi-literacies and multimodal texts in the high school English Language Arts classroom?
- d. To what extent do you believe that the Shakespeare reading comprehension passage in the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is still valid?
- e. If Shakespeare was no longer a required author in English 20-1 and English 30-1 would you continue to teach his works? What would you teach in his place?

### Lesson/Unit Planning

- a. Which Shakespearean plays do you often teach in your English 20-1 and 30-1 classes? Why?
- b. Do you teach a Shakespearean play to your English 10-1 class? Why or why not?
- c. To what extent does the English 30-1 diploma exam influence your approach to teaching Shakespeare?

### Teaching Practice

- a. What effective strategies do you use to teach Shakespeare?
- b. Describe the classroom activities or assignments you use to assess your students' understanding of Shakespearean texts.
- c. To what extent are you able to include multicultural texts and non-Eurocentric perspectives in the classroom?

## **Thanks:**

Thank you again NAME for participating in this interview. I really appreciate your contribution to my research. Have a nice day.