TEACHING FOR WISDOM IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS’ BELIEFS ABOUT LITERATURE AND LIFE LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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Psychologists have proposed that schools should teach for wisdom, but this proposal has rarely been investigated. The present study examines secondary school English language arts as a site of wisdom learning. This qualitative study investigates the instructional goals and beliefs of 16 secondary English teachers (8 beginner, 8 experienced). Interviews were analysed using techniques based in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Results are discussed in light of psychological research, studies of English teaching, and the Ontario curriculum. Some elements of wisdom teaching appear to be supported in English education. Teachers connected literature teaching and classroom practices to students’ life learning, emphasizing life themes, connections to self and experience, self-reflective learning, and individual needs. Experienced teachers frequently made direct connections between life/wisdom learning and student engagement, while beginners voiced concerns about negotiating supportive student-teacher relationships. Implications for proposals to teach for wisdom in schools are discussed, including a possible role for critical literacy.
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1. Introduction

Wisdom is a concept with a rich history across cultures and ages; a subject at the intersection of disciplines, with connections to psychology and other social sciences, the humanities, theology, and beyond (Baltes, 2004; Ferrari, Weststrate & Miller, in press).

Wisdom’s emergence as a focus of contemporary psychological inquiry is relatively recent, but a growing body of research has delineated theories of wisdom and is expanding into applied realms. Psychological perspectives on teaching for wisdom have emerged from this field, and are now beginning to be investigated from educational and applied developmental perspectives, among others (Ferrari & Potworowski, 2008; Ferrari & Weststrate, 2013).

Robert Sternberg (2001b), a prominent wisdom researcher, has proposed English language arts classrooms as a site for the development of wisdom in students. Together with Keith Oatley’s (1999) work on life learning through literature, the potential for life learning and wisdom learning in English classrooms seem worthy of investigation.

The present study examines secondary school English language arts education as a possible setting for life learning and wisdom learning. What do English teachers believe about teaching for life and wisdom? Do present classroom practices support such learning?

To respond to such questions, the present study takes a qualitative approach, seeking to understand teachers’ own experiences, in their own voices and contexts. The perspectives of both beginner and experienced teachers will be explored, permitting an examination of the role of career stage in their views. In introductory sections, I will describe how this study is informed by psychological wisdom research and research on
English teachers’ instructional goals and professional knowledge. Do the current purposes of English teaching (whether explicit in curriculum, or implicit in teachers’ instructional models) appear to be compatible with the project of teaching for wisdom? What complications or contradictions emerge when these topics are juxtaposed? This discussion will also introduce the concept of critical literacy education (e.g. Luke & Woods, 2009) to theorizing on life and wisdom learning.

1.1 Context of the Subject of English and Research on English Teaching

For English-language schooling in Canada, the U.K., the United States, and elsewhere, the subject of English language arts forms the backbone of all academic work: it “teaches the literacy on which the practice of other subjects is based” (Goodson & Medway, 1990, p. vii). It is thus considered the most important subject for primary and secondary schooling (Goodwyn & Findlay, 2002). Because of its central position in schooling, proposing changes to English teaching is by nature a contentious matter (of course, this could be said to be true of all moves in education). As we will see in the reviewed research (particularly in relation to English language arts education in Britain), teachers’ views of teaching exist in a tension between professional knowledge, personal goals, and policy constraints. This adds to the methodological challenges of studying teaching as a professional practice. Doecke, Green, Kostogris, Reed, and Sawyer (2007) commented on research on teaching as follows:

To say that lived experience always remains more complex than any set of categories that we might bring to the analysis of it does not mean ceasing in our efforts to try to understand the world around us. On the contrary, such a stance obliges us to engage in continuing inquiry, resisting closure and embracing the
possibility of a new ways [sic] of thinking and being in the world. (p. 16)

It is important to acknowledge that teachers’ classroom activities “are mediated by a multitude of factors, including existing traditions of curriculum and pedagogy, the professional culture(s) of teachers, as well as the waves of mandated reforms that have become a pronounced feature of our globalising era” (Doecke et al, 2007, p. 7). In addition to its central position as a school subject, English education, like all public education, is reflective of societal priorities (Apple, 2004). As such, all community members are stakeholders, though certain parties are more often named: students, teachers, parents, administrators, policymakers. There are many influences on English education. But acknowledging this complexity does not mean that research about teaching is meaningless or impossible, merely that it must be considered in light of its wider context.

1.2 Goals of the Literature Review

Two main bodies of research inform the present study: psychological wisdom research, and research on English language arts teachers’ instructional goals and professional knowledge. I will begin by considering wisdom research and its suggestions for education, and then move into a discussion of teaching as it relates to ideas of wisdom, and how beliefs about teaching could help to inform and expand the current discourse of teaching for wisdom. Viewed together, the two areas of literature lead to questions about what it means to teach for wisdom, what it means to teach English, and what overlap may exist between these two objectives. This provides a base for the present study, which investigates the beliefs and practices of English teachers as they relate to teaching for wisdom.
2. Prior Research on Wisdom

What might wisdom be, and why would we want people to become wise? This study was primarily informed by psychological theories of wisdom, but such thought has important historical antecedents.

2.1 Historical Views

Much more than a contemporary psychological construct, the concept of wisdom carries cultural, philosophical, historical, and spiritual weight. Historical surveys of wisdom have accompanied psychological inquiries, in an attempt to understand the historical continuity (and diversity) of dominant paradigms. Historical surveys aimed at psychologists and developmental researchers are primarily focused on the Western knowledge tradition in which psychological science is based.

Assmann (1994) and Robinson (1990) provide two perspectives on the varied meaning of wisdom in the Western tradition. As one might expect with a term as loaded as wisdom, these authors occasionally present a conflicting view. But it is fair to conclude, as Assmann does, that “the content of wisdom varies as the historical contexts vary” (p. 196). The acknowledgement that there is a specific kind of knowledge needed to survive, and to flourish, is age-old, but the specifics are far from universal. Wisdom’s practical, adaptive purpose is what defines it across time.

In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, wisdom was a social virtue of daily life, readily-accessible and transmitted through maxims that focused on prudence and conscientiousness (Assmann, 1994). The Old Testament contained books of wisdom of the Israelites, such as Proverbs, carrying on the tradition of “wisdom literature as a
genre,” and sometimes preserving the collected thoughts of the earlier Near Eastern cultures (Assmann, 1994, p. 197).

During the Hellenistic era, Greek schools of thought were divided on their views of wisdom (Assmann, 1994; Robinson, 1990). Although it is risky to generalize on such a complex matter, both Assmann and Robinson suggest that, for the Hellenistic schools, wisdom required more than cognition, acquiring a transcendent quality. Aristotle’s discussion of wisdom remains highly influential: he distinguished between *sophia* (wisdom; contemplation of the way of the world) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom; how to live in accordance with *sophia*), and defined the concept of *eudaimonia*, which is translated as a meaningful kind of happiness, in the sense of flourishing (Assmann, 1994; Curnow, 2008, 2011; Robinson, 1990). From Aristotle comes the notion that wisdom-in-practice (or *phronesis*) is not about gaining divine or perfect knowledge, but about making the right decisions (Curnow, 2011). So, in the Aristotelian tradition, the lived experience of wisdom is less about a single ‘good;’ rather, it is about what is ‘good for’ individuals and the world-at-large (Curnow, 2011). These connections between wisdom, living wisely, and the good life have deeply influenced contemporary psychological discussions of wisdom (e.g. Baltes, 2004; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

Wisdom in the medieval Christian tradition meant grace received from God, though in some traditions, human wisdom could be valued as a reflection of divine wisdom (Robinson, 1990). Some theologians were in favour of scholarship that harmoniously combined the human and the divine; such learning would bring learners closer to God, and thus, to divine wisdom (Assmann, 1994). In the early Renaissance in Italy, the growth of wealth and power outside of the Catholic Church meant that the
‘good life’ began to look more individualistic (Assmann, 1994). With the growing secularization of knowledge through the Renaissance, culminating in the Enlightenment, a divide was mounted between intuitive and empirical ways of knowing (Assmann, 1994; Robinson, 1990). Wisdom was described as science’s foil, and it dropped from intellectual respectability in favour of technical knowledge. In the 19th century, romanticism and transcendentalism revived interest in wisdom within the humanities, but as the burgeoning field of psychology sought recognition in the field of empirical science, scientific interest in wisdom was shunned (Robinson, 1990). But, in the contemporary era, wisdom as a kind of knowledge that “flexibly adjusts to unexpected situations” is receiving renewed interest (Assmann, 1994, p. 204). This move is relevant to researchers working from an empirical perspective, and those who seek to help others to navigate successfully in the world, such as educators (Assmann, 1994).

Although generalizations about ‘East’ and ‘West’ invite the risk of culturally-essentialist thinking (see Gjerde, 2004), some contemporary psychologists have discussed how ‘Eastern’ views of wisdom must also be considered in psychological research (Ardelt, 2003; Baltes, 2004; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Takahashi, 2000; Takahashi & Overton, 2005).

Takahashi (2000) noted that Eastern philosophies and spiritual traditions suggest more integrative explicit theories of wisdom than their Western counterparts. Takahashi and Overton (2005) described wisdom traditions in the West (from Egypt, through Hebraic writings, Greek philosophy, and Christianity) and the East (in ancient Vedic principles, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucian texts). These authors argued that the Western tradition has emphasized the cognitive aspects of wisdom, and that this is
reflected in contemporary psychological conceptions of wisdom. In contrast, the Eastern tradition has focused on the “transformative and integrative process of the whole of wisdom” (Takahashi & Overton, 2005, p. 37). Clayton and Birren (1980) suggested that Eastern wisdom traditions honour altruistic values such as compassion and gratitude, as well as personal mindfulness and balance. While Western knowledge traditions dominate the psychological picture of wisdom, there are places where Eastern views are being considered, most influentially in Monika Ardelt’s work, which I will discuss further below (e.g. Ardelt, 2003; see also Tahahashi & Overton, 2005).

2.1.a Historical perspectives on teaching for wisdom. Can wisdom (in the sense of ‘how to live well’) be taught? As I noted above, thoughts on wisdom have differed across histories and philosophies. I will now look to historical perspectives on the compatibility of wisdom with schooling and texts. Curnow (2008, 2011) described historical situations that relate to contemporary wisdom-teaching attempts. He depicted a diversity of approaches to wisdom, noting that some approaches may be more practical than others, or more suited to certain learning contexts. I will focus on situations that relate to teaching for wisdom through the English language arts. Starting from early writings of the ancient Near East, Curnow (2008) noted that Egyptian books of instruction focus on advising the next generation on how to live well, with proverbs and practical advice on how to act in the social world. These wisdom texts were studied in Egyptian schools as long ago as 1550-1100 B.C.E., and even used as primary materials for acquiring the skills of reading and writing (Assmann, 1994). Such practices appear to have been widespread across the ancient Near East: from about 3000 B.C.E., the Sumerian and Assyrian scribal schools used books of instruction much like those
associated with ancient Egypt, in very similar ways (Ferrari, Weststrate, & Miller, in press; Kitchen, 1977). In the wisdom books of the Old Testament, wisdom sometimes meant doing what you were told (e.g., Proverbs), but sometimes included a “critical or imaginative” element, such as is associated with the wisdom of Solomon (Assmann, 1994; Curnow, 2008, p. 5). Solomon’s wise judgment portrayed in *Kings*\(^1\) forwarded the crucial role of insight, rather than formulaic problem-solving, which seems more in line with the approaches now described in contemporary psychology (Curnow, 2008).

Aristotle, and those who followed his teachings, saw that practical wisdom was about more than knowledge: seeking *phronesis* meant a concern with how to apply wise knowledge in the form of good decisions (Curnow, 2008, 2011). The Platonist, Stoic and Epicurean schools circulated handbooks, letters and dialogues summarizing their doctrines, with the intent that students would memorize these summaries or emulate these dialogues, and learn to live wisely in line with their teachings (Hadot, 1990, 1995). Flynn (2005) described tension between ‘wisdom as knowledge’ and ‘wisdom as practice’ in the Hellenistic period. Beyond superficial memorization of doctrine, Hellenistic traditions typically required the sustained practice of ‘spiritual exercises’ designed to effect a radical transformation of students’ personalities, so as to align them with the dogma of that particular wisdom tradition (Hadot, 1995). Foucault (2005) also described these ancient philosophical practices in his discussion of ‘care of the self:’ truth is not something one *has*, but something one *is* as a way of being (see also Flynn, 2005).

\(^1\) Two women each claimed to be the mother of an infant, and King Solomon was asked to determine which of the women would receive custody. He ruled that the baby should be cut in half, and half given to each woman. One of the women exclaimed that she would rather give up the child than see it harmed, revealing her as the child’s mother. The child was returned to her.
Schooling in the Hellenistic period required students to seek wisdom in literature. In the literary studies of Hellenistic schools, moral examples were sought in the work of the Classical poets, and the maxims found in poetry were then shared as a matter of daily life (Marrou, 1964).

Some medieval Christian writers identified wisdom with theology, implying that wisdom could be taught (but at other times suggesting that wisdom could only be granted by the grace of God: such wisdom could not be the subject of direct instruction). With the ascendance of modern scientific culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the pursuit of knowledge was forwarded over the pursuit of wisdom in Western intellectual life and schooling, and this preference has continued forward to today (Assmann, 1994; Gaukroger, 2006).

2.1.b Summary. Curnow’s survey suggests that explicit connections between wisdom and learning are a part of the history of wisdom. The notion that wisdom could be contained in texts has held both spiritual and pragmatic connotations in the past. Some traditions have emphasized rigid adherence to accepted wisdom (e.g. books of instruction in the ancient Near East), while others have looked to foster more critically-minded understandings of wise action (e.g. Aristotle and the Hellenistic schools). Foucault’s (2005) and Hadot’s (1990, 1995) readings of classical philosophy can help to illuminate the historical distinctions between wisdom as a doctrine of knowledge, and wisdom as engaged practice (what Hadot called ‘spiritual exercises,’ Hadot, 1995; see Flynn, 2005). Wisdom as a part of literary study is at least as old as the Hellenistic schools, presenting an interesting precursor for contemporary proposals to teach for wisdom in the English language arts.
2.2 Psychological Theories

What do psychologists believe to be true about wisdom? Wisdom as a contemporary field of psychological inquiry was established by Clayton and Birren (1980), who were interested in people’s definitions of wisdom (subjective or implicit theories) across the adult lifespan. This implicit line of work continues, but over the past three decades, psychological wisdom researchers have also established a body of work that defines explicit theories of wisdom: attempting to say ‘what wisdom is,’ at a conceptual level, as understood through theories of psychological phenomena such as personality, cognitive skills, and expert knowledge (Staudinger & Glück, 2011).

In part, this study is founded in an interest in whether the views held in the explicit wisdom literature support the practice of teaching for wisdom in secondary school English classrooms. The review of explicit theories focuses on three influential research programs: Monika Ardelt’s three-dimensional personality theory (with brief mention of Labouvie-Vief’s related thoughts); Paul Baltes, Ursula Staudinger and colleagues’ expertise-based Berlin wisdom paradigm; and Robert Sternberg’s balance theory of wisdom.

2.2.a Integration: Ardelt and Labouvie-Vief. Monika Ardelt is interested in personal wisdom, rather than abstracted general wisdom. She describes wisdom as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics (e.g. Ardelt, 2003). Each of these three dimensions must be present, in tandem with the others, in order for wisdom to emerge. Ardelt’s cognitive dimension covers the intellectual and humanistic curiosity that she deems necessary for wisdom: the desire for knowledge and the drive to ask questions about life. The reflective dimension involves self-examination
and weighing various perspectives. The *affective* dimension describes having a prosocial orientation, in the sense of compassionate love (see Ardelt [2004b] for a table detailing the three dimensions). For Ardelt, wisdom is considered to be embodied within individuals, expressed in personality and conduct that models a theoretical “ideal type,” rather than abstracted into intellectual knowledge or wisdom literature (Ardelt, 2004a, p. 305). Ardelt (2011) has proposed that her three-dimensional model of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics is not merely necessary, but indeed sufficient to describe wisdom. This personality-centred view of wisdom is reflected in her research program. A self-report measure for wisdom, the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS), was developed and validated for adult populations (Ardelt, 2003, 2011). Ardelt uses the 3D-WS in her research to investigate how much wisdom people have, and what wise people do (Ardelt, 2004a). Her work has tended to focus on wisdom in older adults and at the end of life (e.g. Ardelt, 1997, 1998, 2005). Ardelt (1997) found that scores on a latent wisdom variable were more predictive of well-being in old age than quality-of-life indicators such as physical health, social involvement, and socioeconomic status (see also Ardelt, 2000). Additional findings suggested that a wise personality type allows people to learn from difficult situations, refuting the ‘folk’ assumption that wisdom is automatically a product of living through adversity (Ardelt, 1998). A later study (Ardelt, 2010) showed an ‘age x experience’ effect for wisdom, with older adults with college degrees demonstrating higher wisdom scores on the 3D-WS than comparison groups of college students or older adults without degrees. This could suggest a facilitative role of early-in-life education for wisdom later-in-life, and I will return to this topic below (see ‘Prior Research on Teaching for Wisdom’).
Ardelt’s wisdom model is linked to Gisela Labouvie-Vief’s (1990) view of wisdom, which I will touch on briefly. Labouvie-Vief (1990) suggests that wisdom is part of an integration of cognition and emotion that occurs in mature development, given optimal intrapersonal and contextual conditions. She argued that the concept of wisdom re-integrates the intrapersonal and interpersonal modes of being back into intellectual thought, allowing for an embodied view of intellectual thought. She described how a rationalist model of the mind orients theory and research on cognitive functioning to “outer, verifiable” modes of thinking, with all other modes (e.g. intuitive, holistic, interdependent) dismissed as immature forms of cognition (Labouvie-Vief, 1990, p. 65). Wisdom, then, could bring embodied and affective cognition back into this respected world of thought. Labouvie-Vief’s use of the intrapersonal (reflective), interpersonal (affective), and intellectual (cognitive) modes seems to parallel nicely with the three dimensions of Ardelt’s wisdom theory.

These integrative, ‘mature personality’ models of wisdom are not easily translated into curriculum-driven wisdom learning, but could relate to social aspects of schooling, as I will discuss later (see ‘Prior Research on Teaching for Wisdom’). As I alluded to in the historical discussion of wisdom, an intuitive and experiential base for wisdom is thought to relate to the cultural knowledge of ‘Eastern’ traditions (Takahashi, 2000; Takahashi & Overton, 2005; Clayton and Birren, 1980). These integrative models could thus prove to be more widely applicable across populations.

\[\text{2 Labouvie-Vief’s theory brings to mind the work of feminist scholars who have critiqued the privileging of logic over emotion, noting that this preference reflects and enforces patriarchal dualisms which denote ‘mind’ and ‘intellect’ as masculine, and ‘body’ and ‘emotion’ as feminine (e.g. Lipps, 1999). Embodied theories of wisdom, then, could perhaps be read as critiquing gendered views of the nature of knowledge.}\]
2.2.b Expertise: The Berlin wisdom paradigm. Paul Baltes, Ursula Staudinger, and their colleagues conceptualize wisdom as a form of expertise, or an expert knowledge system (Baltes and Smith, 1990). Their research program, the Berlin wisdom paradigm, is concerned with delineating the theoretical construct of wisdom, which they consider to be “expertise in the conduct and meaning of life” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 124).

Baltes and Staudinger (2000) presented a review of the Berlin research program. They use five criteria to define wisdom-related performance: (1) factual knowledge about living a good life; (2) procedural knowledge about living a good life; (3) knowledge about developmental and social contexts across the lifespan; (4) tolerance for differences in values and priorities; and (5) facing and managing uncertainty about the world (an overview of these categories can be found in Staudinger and Pasupathi [2003]). Criteria 1 and 2, factual and procedural knowledge, are the basic knowledge criteria for wisdom that are suggested by the expertise framework. Criteria 3, 4, and 5 are considered to be ‘metacriteria’ that are specific to wisdom. Their deployment coordinates the use of factual and procedural knowledge in ways that the Berlin group considers wise.

Baltes and colleagues’ empirical research has focused on understanding and measuring wisdom in individuals, as a path to validating their theoretical construct (see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Their research paradigm asks participants to respond out loud, in an interview-style setting, to standard ‘life dilemma’ scenarios. Participants describe their beliefs about what a person ought to consider and do when faced with the dilemma at hand (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996). Responses are later scored on the five criteria described above, with a ‘wise’ response requiring a high level of performance on all five criteria. The term ‘wisdom-related performance’ is used to describe performance
that shows evidence of wisdom-related knowledge, but does not meet the high standard of wise performance. Research findings from the Berlin paradigm have suggested developmental and social facets of wisdom performance. One of the most striking findings suggests that older does not equal wiser: in adulthood (from about age 25 on), increased age is not associated with an increase in wisdom (Staudinger, 1999). But when looking at the ‘wisest’ participants (the top 20% of performers), an ‘age x facilitative experience’ effect may be at play (Staudinger, 1999). Predictive correlates of wisdom have been examined with psychometric tests, with creativity and cognitive style showing the strongest relationships (Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997). In the Berlin group’s research framework, the “person factors” and “expertise-specific factors” described above are influenced by “facilitative experiential contexts” such as education, providing mentoring, and working in a related professional field such as clinical psychology (see figure in Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 125). Thus, their research has also investigated the social nature of wisdom, finding that imagined or real consultation with a respected peer has a facilitative effect on performance (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996). The Berlin group found that clinical psychologists scored more highly on wisdom performance than comparison groups with similar education levels, and in some cases even outperformed people specifically nominated as wise (see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Smith, Staudinger, & Baltes, 1994). The oral and written cultural knowledge embedded in proverbs is also of interest to the Berlin group, and they have noted that people are able to selectively employ proverbs that apply to specific life situations (Freund & Baltes, 2002). This acknowledgment of the wisdom held in cultural texts could perhaps be seen to support the project of teaching for wisdom in English class. The view held by the Berlin group,
reinforced in the results of their empirical studies, holds that high levels of wisdom are rare (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000)

**Staudinger’s personal wisdom.** More recent work by Ursula Staudinger and her colleagues has turned towards the examination of wisdom and personality, and personal wisdom (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). This turn has moved her research closer to that of Ardelt, who had criticized the Berlin group’s earlier studies for focusing on intellectual knowledge about life, rather than accessing wisdom itself: knowing about life in the abstract is different from living it oneself (Ardelt, 2004b). Ardelt had also proposed that Baltes and colleagues’ view of wisdom did not adequately embrace the specific challenges of self-directed wisdom (making judgments in or about one’s own life), or the particular quality of “caring, sympathetic, and compassionate [behaviour] toward others” that characterizes wise people (as Ardelt defines them; Ardelt, 2004b, p. 279).

Staudinger and colleagues’ work on personal wisdom is differentiated from general wisdom by the fact that it is about one’s own life, rather than about someone else’s (hypothetical) life, or life in general. In developing a self-report measure of personal wisdom, Mickler and Staudinger (2008) found that advancing age may actually hinder the development of personal wisdom in adults, and linked this to cognitive aging, decreasing openness to experience, and decreasing interest in personality growth, along with possible cohort effects due to the cross-sectional nature of the study. These findings could point to the importance of encouraging the growth of personal wisdom at younger ages, such as for high school students. Staudinger and her colleagues (e.g. Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005), like Ardelt (2003) and Labouvie-Vief (1990), link personal wisdom to personality maturity, suggesting that adolescents would be developmentally some ways
away from meeting the desired personal wisdom criteria (see Mickler & Staudinger, 2008, for more details on these criteria). Many adolescents may not have a sufficient range of life experiences to build personal wisdom. However, building-block characteristics such as balancing between different value systems, and developing and maintaining relationships (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008), seem like important developmental tasks for adolescents and excellent fodder for English-class reading, writing, and discussion. In fact, in her work on general wisdom with the Berlin group, Staudinger and her colleagues (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001) proposed that adolescence is a key developmental period for wisdom-related knowledge and judgment, a point to which I will return in the discussion of ‘Wisdom in Adolescence’ below.

2.2.c Thinking skills: Sternberg’s balance theory. Robert Sternberg’s balance theory of wisdom presents the closest links to applied educational concerns. Sternberg (2001b) proposes that wisdom is a specialized kind of problem-solving that draws on tacit knowledge and balance. Like Baltes and colleagues’ Berlin wisdom paradigm, Sternberg’s balance theory is influenced by expertise models. Tacit knowledge in wisdom means ‘knowing how’ to conduct oneself wisely (vs. declarative knowledge, which is about facts: ‘knowing about’ conducting oneself wisely). Balance (as defined by Sternberg) refers to an orientation towards the common good: balancing interpersonal, intrapersonal, and extrapersonal interests. (We have seen these some of these same concerns reflected in the other psychological theories, as well as historically in the ‘prudent’ wisdom tradition of the ancient Near East.) Balance also includes accounting for the competing demands of short-term and long-term interests, and determining which adaptive strategy is wisest: should one attempt to adapt to the present circumstances,
contribute to changing those circumstances, or remove oneself from those circumstances?

Sternberg thus relates wisdom to practical intelligence, but with the added qualifier of a just value orientation. Although he acknowledges that values could be considered relative, he appeals to the possibility of a universal set of values (an appeal to universal values is also found in the Berlin wisdom paradigm, e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; see also Kekes’ [1983] wisdom theory, and Peterson and Seligman’s [2004] theory of character strengths and virtues).

For Sternberg, the processes of wisdom are metacognitive in nature, involving reflective problem-solving. Knowledge required for wisdom is learned through selectively encoding, comparing, and combining information. Sternberg maintains, though, that the specifics of applying such knowledge are the domain of tacit knowledge. Sternberg (2001b) notes that tacit knowledge is generally considered to be acquired through experience rather than direct instruction. The highly-contextual nature of tacit knowledge leads Sternberg to suggest that wisdom cannot be taught directly, but even so, he proposes that educators can shape (or scaffold; Tudge & Rogoff, 1989) learning environments so that learners have the opportunity and the support to try to make their own wise decisions. Sternberg (2001b) sums up his view of teaching for wisdom as follows: “you cannot tell someone the wise course of action that will apply under every circumstance. You can provide learning experiences that will help that person make his or her own wise decisions” (p. 230). Sternberg has laid out a detailed plan for teaching his balance theory of wisdom, which I will explore more fully in a later section (see ‘Prior Research on Teaching for Wisdom’).
2.2.d **Summary.** Wisdom researchers have acknowledged the contentious, even impossible nature of the task of attempting to define wisdom (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Looking at both historical and psychological conceptions of wisdom, I follow Assmann (1994) in noting that “wisdom is a value term embedded in cultural context” with meanings that are, accordingly, variable (p. 187). But, in general, wisdom is knowledge that answers “the problems of our lives” (Wittgenstein, as quoted in Assmann, 1994, p. 221); that highlights the meaning(s) and value(s) of a life well-lived. Wisdom is about understanding and addressing the dilemmas and uncertainties of human existence, with all of their complexities and competing incentives (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Wisdom is a social virtue, so even if it conceived as situated within the individual (as is psychologists’ preferred conception), it is deeply tied to how we think about others and how we act in the social world.

Psychological researchers have acknowledged that “wisdom may be beyond what psychological methods and concepts can achieve” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 123). However, their definitions centre around the idea that wisdom is about the art of living well, maximizing positive outcomes for oneself, others, and the greater world. Researchers are invested in continuing their dialogue on these topics and remaining open to new approaches to understanding wisdom (Ardelt, 2004b).

Wisdom is about life, in its deepest sense, and thus, considerations of teaching for wisdom are also considerations of teaching for life.

2.3 **Wisdom in Adolescence**

Having presented arguments about what wisdom is, and why it is important, I move into some more applied considerations. Can we consider wisdom to be within the
grasp of high-school-aged learners? Are these students developmentally-prepared to benefit from teaching for wisdom? Psychological research provides some insights.

2.3.a Wisdom and age across the lifespan. Sternberg (2005) reviewed research on the relationship between age and wisdom. He notes that different theoretical perspectives on wisdom suggest different trajectories across the lifespan: some predict gains, some expect losses, some see a stable level of wisdom across adulthood (Sternberg himself postulates that individual differences in wisdom are too great to allow for any singular developmental path across individuals). The research reviewed above relays some of these diverse views. The Berlin group has conducted the majority of empirical studies in this area, and have found that wisdom is not necessarily a product of age. For example, Staudinger (1999) found no age-related increases in wisdom beyond young adulthood, while Mickler & Staudinger (2008) found that personal wisdom declined across adulthood. These findings could suggest that, for most people, formative wisdom learning is happening prior to young adulthood.

2.3.b Psychological development in adolescence. Richardson and Pasupathi (2005) examined the psychological developments in the adolescent years that could support the emergence of wisdom. Research on intellectual development, self/identity development, and personality development during adolescence point to improvements in self-reflective thinking (e.g. Case, 1992), increased reasoning abilities (e.g. Ward & Overton, 1990), advances in developing one’s sense of self (Erikson & Erikson, 1997), increased open-mindedness (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1994), and improvements in perspective-taking and moral reasoning (Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, & Lieberman, 1983; Piaget, 1932; see Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005, for a comprehensive review). However,
the authors caution that wise reasoning, or even a motivation towards wise action, does not guarantee that adolescents’ actions can be considered wise: motivation does not always translate into action. They propose a ‘lag hypothesis,’ in which traits and processes that support wisdom undergo important changes during adolescence, but the kinds of wise actions sought in empirical wisdom studies may not be observed until adulthood (note that interviews have provided a window into adolescents’ sense of wisdom without relying on performance measures, e.g. Glück, Bluck, Baron & McAdams, 2005). Richardson and Pasupathi (2005) conclude that research on adolescents’ cognitive development supports the proposal that adolescence is an important time for wisdom-related development.

2.3.c Wisdom studies with adolescent samples. Few wisdom studies have been conducted with adolescent samples, but the available findings are helpful (see review in Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005). Pasupathi et al. (2001) asked teens and adults aged 14 to 37 to respond to life dilemma scenarios, and noted that for the adolescent respondents, wisdom-related performance improved as age increased, up to the age of 24, when age-related increases were no longer observed (recall that wise performance is defined as meeting the Berlin wisdom paradigm criteria, while ‘wisdom-related performance’ describes an incomplete but significant fulfilment of those criteria). A cross-sectional study by Anderson (1998) examining a similar age range (15 to 27) also found age-related increases in wisdom performance according to the Berlin criteria through the adolescent years and into young adulthood. Though wisdom-related performance was ‘generally low’ at this time of life, there were significant increases in wisdom scores across the years of middle adolescence to the mid-twenties (Anderson, 1998). Staudinger
and Pasupathi (2003) found that intelligence and personality factors (crystallized intelligence, and openness to experience) varied with wisdom-related performance in adolescence. If such factors are taken to be highly stable over time, or innate, then this association would not support teaching for wisdom. However, such views are not uniformly held (for example, some research argues for the changeability of intelligence over time; Deary, 2012).

Bluck and Glück (2004) examined the autobiographical wisdom narratives of adolescents (15 to 20 years old), younger adults (30 to 40), and older adults (60 to 70). They found that adolescents, like both adult groups, referred to fundamental life situations (i.e., situations dealing with pivotal decisions or personally-important matters). Like adults, adolescents viewed wise actions as having positive outcomes. But, they were less likely than adults to contextualize lessons learned within their broader life stories.

Ardelt (2010) validated the use of the 3D-WS for young adult populations, and did not find that wisdom score differed significantly with age for the American college students she assessed. She also found that older adults did not score significantly higher than college students on the 3D-WS, adding weight to the notion that wisdom does not automatically increase with age. The reflective dimension of wisdom did, however, seem to increase with age for all participants, revealing a different developmental trajectory for wisdom than that assessed by the Berlin wisdom research. Labouvie-Vief’s (1990) wisdom theory is based in developmental stages, with wisdom emerging in middle adulthood, but her research supports a rise in wisdom-related constructs earlier in development that levels off as middle adulthood approaches.
It is important to note that there is a lack of longitudinal studies of wisdom. Studies examining changes in wisdom over time have been conducted using cross-sectional designs. Cohort effects are, therefore, a potentially serious confound.

Researchers have not established a definitive view of wisdom’s relationship with age, but the reviewed research suggests that “adolescence is a key period for the development of wisdom” (Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005, p. 139; Sternberg, 2005). Thus, psychological research supports the view that secondary school students are developmentally-ready for wisdom-related learning.

2.4 Prior Research on Teaching for Wisdom

Having established students’ developmental preparedness for wisdom learning, I now turn to considerations of how one might teach for wisdom, based on ideas from the psychological literature. I will also look at the roles ascribed to literary texts in psychological wisdom learning.

2.4.a Research on teachers-as-wise. Some studies have touched on connections between teaching and being wise, though they have not universally supported an explicit link.

As mentioned earlier, the Berlin group (e.g. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) has proposed that the development of wisdom becomes more likely in the presence of facilitative contexts such as education, mentorship, and professional work contexts that are concerned with the fundamental pragmatics of life. Baltes and colleagues consider clinical psychology to be a particularly important facilitative professional context, and they determined that their findings support this assertion (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Smith et al., 1994). With a similar goal, Marchand (1998) considered that teaching could
be a facilitative activity for wisdom and compared the responses of teachers and members of non-teaching professions on the Berlin wisdom paradigm’s life review tasks. Groups of younger (mean age 29), middle-aged (mean age 42), and older women (mean age 69) were assessed. Marchand expected that teachers would perform better than non-teachers on the life review tasks, noting that teachers act as mentors, “giving advice in difficult and uncertain matters of life—tasks which might be expected to enhance wisdom-related knowledge” (p. 371). However, teachers did not outperform the non-teachers in her study. For the young adults, non-teachers did slightly better than teachers, and for the middle-aged group the opposite trend was observed, with teachers slightly outperforming non-teachers, but the difference was not significant in either case. There was no difference in performance among older teachers and non-teachers. Marchand concluded that teachers’ professional training and work experiences are insufficient for the development of high levels of wisdom-related knowledge. (However, this could also be an artefact of the Berlin wisdom paradigm’s operationalization of wisdom. Perhaps it is incompatible with the wisdom of teaching.)

Even if teachers were not empirically found to be wiser than non-teachers, teachers are generally thought to be wise. Jason and colleagues (2001) asked participants in the Chicago, Illinois area to name the wisest living person they could think of, and for those participants who named someone they knew personally (rather than a famous person), teachers were the most frequently named category of acquaintance (tied with work colleagues). But both teachers and work colleagues are figures who participants would have had particularly close contact with over long periods of time, so the availability heuristic could be playing a role. Still, it is interesting to see teachers being
nominated as wise at a significant rate. Khan (2009) asked 50 residents of Karachi, Pakistan (ranging in age from 9 to 65-plus) who they considered to be their wisest acquaintance. He found that 20 percent of the wisdom nominees were schoolteachers, with people in young and middle adulthood most likely to nominate schoolteachers as wise. Khan reported that Islamic preachers in Pakistan also fall under the umbrella of ‘teacher,’ due to their role in the teaching of Islamic principles. When these religious figures were included in the teacher category, teacher nominees then made up more than one-third of all wise acquaintances, leading Khan to suggest that teachers are respected as especially wise in Pakistan. Together, the findings of Jason et al. (2001) and Khan (2009) suggest that there is a perceived link between teaching and wisdom.

2.4.b Psychological perspectives. Next, I will consider how explicit theories of wisdom relate to teaching for wisdom. What do these theories say about how to teach for wisdom?

The Berlin group’s expertise treatment of wisdom suggests certain facilitating factors for its acquisition (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Their model of the acquisition of wisdom-related knowledge and skills includes “person-specific factors” such as cognitive strengths and personality traits. It also includes “expertise-specific factors” such as experience and “organized tutelage” that form part of expertise models of skill acquisition in general (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 125; Ericsson, 2006). In the Berlin model, these two sets of factors are affected by ‘facilitative contexts’ such as opportunities to benefit from education, to provide mentorship in life matters, and to work in professional contexts related to the fundamental pragmatics of life. Baltes, Staudinger, and colleagues believe that becoming wise involves a combination of
intensive learning, practice, and motivation. Hand-in-hand with one’s own life experiences, one must benefit from the guidance of mentors or societal wisdom figures. Guidance and mentorship is one place where teachers could play a part in the development of wisdom. An expertise model does lend itself to learning, though generally of a much more intensive sort than current schooling contexts could provide (Ericsson, 2006). Richardson and Pasupathi (2005) argued that adolescence is a prime period for “interventions aimed at enhancing wisdom,” referencing specific facilitative strategies used in lab-based studies (p. 154). For example, for adults, real or imagined discussion of a life problem with a valued peer was found to facilitate wisdom-related performance, where time for reflection was also provided (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996). These authors do not comment on schooling’s potential role in the encouragement of wisdom, but the social environment of a classroom could certainly support peer discussion of life concerns (likely abstract life concerns rather than personal, due to the desire for privacy and the potentially impersonal nature of the classroom).

For Ardelt, wisdom is always embodied: “Even the most profound ‘wisdom literature’ remains intellectual or theoretical knowledge until its inherent wisdom is realized by a person” (2004b, p. 260). Her emphasis on the social orientation of wisdom and her insistence that we view wisdom as a human, embodied way of being could imply that the kinds of social interaction and life learning that take place in schools are important for wisdom. But, her definition of wisdom as a personality type could be seen as conflicting with teaching for wisdom, since wisdom is conceptualized as a ‘type’ of person rather than a product of certain experiences. However, research suggests that, at least for the Big Five traits, personality is changeable in childhood, and different traits
vary in their stability over the lifespan (Hampson & Goldberg, 2006). Even with a focus on personality, in one study, Ardelt (2000) acknowledged that experiences earlier in life can have an impact on successful aging. Ardelt (2004b) also suggested that if we are concerned with wisdom-related knowledge rather than wisdom itself, it is during the adolescent years that substantial learning about ‘the fundamental pragmatics of life’ begins. And if we look back to Staudinger’s (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008) ‘mature personality’ view of wisdom, then perhaps we can look to educational settings as sites where wise personality development could be encouraged. Or, if we consider that teaching about life and wisdom is not only for so-called wise students, but is for the benefit of all students, then Ardelt’s personality focus need not pose a conflict.

Labouvie-Vief’s (1990) integrative-personality theory of wisdom suggests the importance of facilitative contexts, including exposure to “mythological themes” (in the Jungian tradition, but this also relates to the study of canon texts in secondary school), and a surrounding ethos that supports deep understanding of the human condition that links cognition and emotion (p. 78). School communities and the mentorship of teachers could provide early support for such development.

The role of education was discussed by Ardelt (2010), who found no age-related increase in wisdom when comparing current college students with older adults. But when older adults with a college degree were considered as a separate group, they were found to score more highly than the other participant groups. Ardelt takes this to mean that the experiences facilitated by a college degree, together with time, can lead to greater levels of wisdom. Amongst the top 20% of wisdom scorers, there was a proportionally larger group of older adults with a college (i.e. university) degree, suggesting that events earlier
in maturation can affect wisdom at a later age. Ardelt acknowledges that her samples
were not sufficiently representative, so more research needs to be done in this area. Smith
et al. (1994) also found an ‘age x experience’ effect for older high wisdom scorers,
though they were looking at the effect of profession rather than the effect of a college
degree in general. These authors found that performance on wisdom tasks improved with
age for those in ‘wisdom-related occupations’ such as clinical psychology, suggesting
that having certain kinds of experience over time facilitates the development of wisdom:
spending your time and energy discussing life’s larger concerns improves your ability to
do so. This could imply that life discussions in school settings might be helpful for the
development of wisdom, although Marchand (1998) did not find that teachers benefitted
in this way (teachers did not show higher Berlin wisdom scores than non-teachers in her
study).

A critique of the facilitative effects of education and profession in Ardelt (2010)
and Smith et al. (1994). Findings that hint at a facilitative link between education and
wisdom are intriguing for the present study. But there are some troubling assumptions
made in the Ardelt (2010) study that must be addressed. Ardelt (2010) suggests that
college-educated older adults will be wiser than their same-age peers because of “more
opportunities and/or greater motivation to pursue the development of wisdom” (p. 195).
She looked to personality factors to understand the link between wisdom and education,
suggesting that those who are more open to experience are more likely to pursue higher
education. But economic factors and social barriers strongly shape educational and
vocational paths (e.g. Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993).
Suggesting that those who pursue higher education are more motivated to be wise ignores
the social factors that shape access to education: this naturalizes what is in fact a social, structural phenomenon. And finding college-educated adults to be wiser than those without a degree implies a conflation of the knowledge and experiences of people of high socioeconomic status with the knowledge and experience called ‘wisdom.’ Similarly, in Smith et al. (1994), the professional clinical psychologists who are found to be wisest can be assumed to enjoy a certain level of privilege and affluence. A follow-up study (reviewed in Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) found that high-profile wisdom nominees from other professions performed as well as, or even better than clinical psychologists. Thus, this depiction of wisdom may be less about facilitative experience than it is about social class (and stature within affluent communities). It seems entirely possible that higher education facilitates access to mentors and career paths that foster wisdom (as Ardelt and the Berlin group measure it), but this reinforces the unfortunate idea that only those who are able to access certain social privileges will be considered wise.

2.4.c Summary. Psychological wisdom research provides some insights into what it could mean to teach for wisdom. The role of mentors, the possibility of facilitative interventions or experiences, and malleability of personality in youth support teaching for wisdom and provide some general guidelines. And research which suggests that wisdom does not increase with age in adulthood implies that wisdom interventions should take place at younger ages for maximum efficacy (e.g. Pasupathi et al., 2001; Anderson, 1998). Combined with students’ cognitive developmental readiness (Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005), this positions secondary school students as prime candidates for wisdom learning. I have described how some reservations about how facilitative contexts (including education) have been treated in psychological research, raising questions about
what ‘being wiser’ really means for some researchers. But this is not to mean that education is incompatible with wisdom; rather, it is necessary to acknowledge that relative social advantage (or disadvantage) results in differential access to facilitative educational experiences. Quality public education holds the possibility of reducing such barriers, but this goal has not yet been realized (Apple, 2004; Freire, 1998). Despite such concerns, it appears that psychological perspectives on wisdom and adolescent development support teaching for wisdom in secondary schools.

2.5 Sternberg’s Balanced Curriculum

Sternberg’s wisdom research is much more comprehensive in its discussions of teaching for wisdom, so I present it separately. His balance theory of wisdom (Sternberg, 2001b) is explicitly aligned with educational applications. Sternberg argued that wisdom should be part of schooling because wisdom is an important part of human flourishing, both individually and collectively. Since he sees declarative knowledge alone as insufficient for informing wise judgment, schooling should include “wisdom-related skills” in its prerogatives (2001b, p. 237). Sternberg’s focus on cognitive skills means that he is interested in programs that teach the cognitive antecedents of wisdom—trying to teach “how to think” (2001b, p. 237). His principles for teaching wisdom dictate that teachers give space for students to reflect on fulfilment, community, values, and interests, and that teachers model these practices for students (he does note that these are already facets of what he considers to be good teaching).

Sternberg’s (2001b) practical suggestions for the classroom are designed to provide scaffolding for the kind of reflection that could lead to wisdom. He is also interested in highlighting a diversity of perspectives on the world. Class discussions
should encourage dialogical thinking (encompassing the possibility of multiple perspectives) and dialectical thinking (in the Hegelian sense, considering that knowledges have changed and continue to change over time, and are situated in particular epistemologies). Materials that present “the wisdom of the sages” (p. 283) should be used in class, and ethnocentrism and “propagandistic teaching” (p. 284) must be eliminated from curricula, in American history for example. (But there is a potential contradiction here if most materials are subjected to critical inquiry, while ‘the wisdom of the sages’ is presented as a special case that does not merit critical inquiry.) As a part of this project, the cultural and historical contexts of knowledge must be a part of learning. Importantly, the teaching of literature is part of Sternberg’s argument, and I will return to this point below.

Sternberg (2001b) proposed exploring the efficacy of his balanced curriculum with a study of approximately three dozen middle-school classrooms, with about 600 students. He suggests that wisdom learning is important in the pre-teen years because students will face a new set of life challenges as they enter adolescence, with more freedoms and more serious choices to make. In his view, students at this age are prepared for wisdom learning, and will benefit from learning balanced thinking before they have the opportunity to make unbalanced and potentially harmful choices. He proposed embedding 12 wisdom topics within the curriculum, covering one topic per week, starting from ‘what is wisdom?,’ followed by segments focused on various components of his theory (the common good, values, interests, environments), moving into specific examples of wisdom, and how wisdom can be applied to students’ lives and the present world. Curriculum materials for teachers are said to include suggestions and examples for
how to integrate these topics into subjects such as social science, science, language arts (i.e. English), and history. He also proposed extensive in-service training for teachers prior to launching the program, and ongoing feedback between teachers and researchers during the 12 weeks. He planned four assessments of the program’s efficacy to be conducted at various times, using conflict-resolution and life-scenario dilemmas. Raters would assess the quality of these responses to see if they reflect wise decisions, as defined by the balance theory. He also proposed monitoring teachers’ application of the curriculum. However, results of the proposed study have not been published.

More recently, Sternberg, Jarvin, and Grigorenko (2009) have written about teaching for wisdom within the broader purview of their ‘WICS’ model (Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity, Synthesized). The authors argue that wisdom, intelligence and creativity should be prioritized in education that purports to lead to a successful life, effectively expanding the balance theory of wisdom to account for the respective roles of intelligence and creativity in wise thinking. Essentially a ‘how-to’ guide, WICS provides further guidance of how to teach for (Sternberg’s version of) wisdom, and describes many of the same principles detailed above in his balanced curriculum.

2.5.a The balanced curriculum and the English language arts. The potential links between English education and wisdom will be a focus of later sections, but Sternberg’s balance theory also provides a way to think about this connection. Sternberg (2001b) suggests that to teach for wisdom in English class, teaching of literature would need to reflect a kind of balance that right now is often absent. Literature is often taught in terms of the standards and context of the contemporary U.S. scene. Characters often are judged in terms of our
contemporary standards rather than in terms of the standards of the time and place in which the events took place. From the proposed standpoint, the study of literature must, to some extent, be done in the context of the study of history. The banning of books often reflects the application of certain contemporary standards to literature, standards of which an author from the past never could have been aware. (p. 239)

Sternberg suggests that this historical-context approach would encourage dialogical thinking, helping students to engage with the multiple perspectives of different historical and social contexts (Sternberg et al., 2009). However, it is possible that that uncritical contextualization could merely serve to reinforce the validity of harmful views. Contextualization is important, but this should include a critical literacy approach to contextualization, which involves critical engagement with the standards and views presented in literature. This notion of critical literacy will come up again to conclude the discussion of psychological perspectives on wisdom.

2.5.b Summary. Sternberg’s (2001a; 2001b; Sternberg et al., 2009) writing on teaching for wisdom, while exhaustive, leaves a number of questions unanswered. Despite the applied nature of his work, he does not provide any accounts of student or teacher experience of his proposed wisdom-skills activities, and he has not reported any results to support his assertions. However, he provides the only structured and explicit view of teaching for wisdom grounded in psychological theory. Sternberg’s work may present some contradictions, as I noted above, but his emphasis on a classroom environment that is centred around reflection on fulfilment, community, values, and interests is worthy of praise. He argues for teaching thinking skills that support balanced
judgment and engaging with multiple perspectives. He even draws a direct link between subject learning (including English) and teaching for life and wisdom. Although some have found Sternberg’s proposals contentious (see Sternberg, 2001a), his work is important to the project of teaching for wisdom. Unfortunately, little research exists to support or dispute psychological views of teaching for wisdom such as Sternberg’s, but the present study may help to fill this gap.

2.6 Cognitive Processes Implicated in Wisdom

With Sternberg focused so strongly on thinking skills in his plans to teach for wisdom, I will now more closely examine research on the cognitive skills that he and others have proposed as important to wisdom and life learning (e.g. Sternberg et al., 2009). Past research has highlighted certain cognitive processes as significant for wisdom, and also established connections between these processes and English language arts education. First, I will detail how critical thinking has been taught through literature. Second, I will discuss the process of imaginative simulation, which bridges the gap between life learning, cognition, and fiction. Finally, I will describe how metacognition is thought to be important both to wisdom and to literacy.

2.6.a Critical thinking. Critical thinking is related to evaluating information and drawing conclusions, processes which are key to wisdom-related balanced judgment (Sternberg, 2001b), reflection (Ardelt, 2003), and conduct (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Marzano (1991) discussed the relationship between critical thinking and English education. Critical thinking can be considered in terms of the deployment of logical reasoning, but attempts to teach mental logic have suffered from a lack of transferability between tasks. In another sense, critical thinking can be viewed as a disposition or habit.
This cannot be taught directly, but can be modelled by teachers, or learned through Socratic discussion based around issues found in texts or drawn from life.

**Philosophy for Children.** Matthew Lipman’s Philosophy for Children program (or ‘P4C’) is an example of this kind of disposition-oriented teaching (Fisher, 2008; Lipman, 2003; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscayan, 1980). The program is designed to develop a classroom ‘community of inquiry,’ i.e., a collective exploratory attitude (Lipman, 2003; Lipman et al., 1980). Developed to be integrated from preschool through secondary school (ages 3 to 16-plus), P4C is built around a series of novels authored by Lipman that are written to spark philosophical questions and debate. Materials are read aloud as a group, students generate questions for discussion and determine which question to pursue as a class, and the teacher facilitates the discussion and follow-up activities (Fisher, 2008).

Lipman’s view of philosophy echoes Hadot’s (1995) and Foucault’s (2005) discussions of Hellenistic spiritual exercises: here, philosophy is not a set of truths to acquire, but a mindset and a way of interacting with the world. Lipman believes in supporting an engaged, caring and nonviolent school environment that permits free and open discussion (including discussion of values and beliefs; Lipman, 2003). Lipman suggests that the skills of inquiry and reasoning developed through a Socratic approach to classroom learning support meaning-making, and thus student engagement and motivation (recall that Sternberg’s [2001b] balanced curriculum also argued for a Socratic-discussion approach to critical thinking). Lipman also believes in the cross-curricular value of critical thinking skills. He argues that thinking skills develop as a function of experience of certain mental acts (such as participation in the guided
discussions of P4C), and are then accessible across other skills and subjects. So, the reasoning skills developed through P4C are not ‘beside’ or ‘in addition to’ literacy and numeracy; they are fundamental to them. Lipman echoes Sternberg when he suggests that schooling fails when schools explicitly teach knowledge but not judgment. Although, presently, “judgment is in no way a recognized area of educational responsibility,” he argues for education that supports critical, creative, and caring judgment (Lipman, 2003, p. 272). Lipman sees judgments as both formative actions for character-building, and cumulative reflections of the ‘whole person’ engaged in continuous learning and change.

Beyond these theoretical rationales, other researchers have examined P4C’s effectiveness across a variety of domains, and a review of controlled studies found uniformly positive results, with moderate effect sizes in areas such as reading, math, logical reasoning, and self-esteem (Trickey & Topping, 2004). Earlier research had shown P4C to have positive effects on skills acquisition (e.g. reading level), maturity (‘mental age’), and classroom behaviour (Chance, 1986, as cited in Marzano, 1991).

Lipman’s (2003) embodied view of judgment is similar to Ardelt’s (2003) person-centred, integrative view of wisdom. And, as I noted above, P4C certainly shares ground with Sternberg’s (2001b) balanced curriculum, with both exploring the concept of judgment. Where Sternberg suggested that literature must be taught in the context of history, Lipman argues that reading and writing must be taught not only in the context of literature, but in the context of the humanities as a whole, prioritizing language and philosophy. Thus, both consider the situated nature of knowledge to be important to critical thinking.
P4C has demonstrated that a critical thinking program based around reading and discussion can have positive effects in the classroom. This lends support to the possibility of teaching for wisdom in English class, where the discussion of texts is a central concern (also, below, a section on the Ontario Curriculum for English will revisit the idea of critical thinking in classrooms). While the P4C approach depends on Lipman’s novels, critical thinking education embedded in the English language arts introduces the opportunity to work with a variety of texts that could reflect a wider range of life perspectives.

2.6.b Literature as imaginative simulation. Keith Oatley, a cognitive psychologist, draws on empirical findings in his argument for bridging the gap between empirical psychology and literary fiction (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999). As a window into human experience, Oatley (1999) suggests that “fiction provides context to understand the elliptical. It offers the context of characters’ goals and plans. It gives a sense of how action leads to vicissitudes. It allows, too, the reader to experience something of emotions that can arise” (p. 108). Thus, as a tool for understanding life, literature provides more than an empirical copy of life: it provides a situated experience; a cognitive, emotional, imaginative simulation. Readers can gain life knowledge, even wisdom, from these simulations, often accessing the kinds of experiences that they cannot in their daily lives (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Fiction carries such experiential truth, and also “personal truth,” which enables an emotional connection between text and reader that facilitates deep insight into the social world (Oatley, 1999, p. 109). Oatley also suggests that fiction provides a safe “laboratory space” for readers to explore emotions, goals, and actions (and their interrelations; 1999, p. 112). New insights into existential dilemmas
can arise when readers ‘enact’ an affective personal engagement with literature, blurring the distinction between reader and writer (or ‘real life’ and ‘text’; Brockmeier, 2009, 2011; Sikora, Miall, & Kuiken, 1998, as cited in Oatley, 1999). From literary and empirical evidence, Oatley argues that it is the emotional connection to literature that gives it its power: Emotion orients us to what is important in life, and directs us to “truth as coherence” and “truth as personal relevance” (1999, p. 103).

Brockmeier’s (e.g., 2011) work has also forwarded the notion that engaging with narratives through composition or reading both forms and accesses a collective ‘social mind,’ blurring the Cartesian divide between the individual mind and the world beyond. This builds on the work of Bruner (1986, 1990), who argued that the ontological status of ‘imagined worlds’ is less important than their ability to help us understand the human condition (if there can be one unifying ‘human condition’). The ‘narrative imagination’ that Brockmeier (2009) proposes is both a way of constructing meanings and a way of extending what meanings are possible.

Imaginative engagement with narratives, whether oral or written, biographical or fictitious, is thus presented as a fundamental way in which people understand their worlds and determine how to act in them (Oatley, 1999; Brockmeier, 2009).

**2.6.c Metacognition.** Sternberg’s (2001b) and the Berlin wisdom group’s (e.g. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) thoughts on the nature and development of wisdom are linked to metacognition, defined by A. Brown (1978) as the awareness, monitoring and control of both the factual/declarative knowledge and the tacit/procedural knowledge required to complete a task. This involves the ability to reflect on one’s own thought processes and

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3 Such a divide is a false duality for those who take a discursive or postmodern view of the text (see R. Brown, 1990).
behaviours. This definition of metacognition aligns closely with expertise, and so it is not surprising to see that it maps directly onto the Berlin wisdom paradigm’s two basic criteria of wisdom-as-expertise: factual and procedural knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life. Sternberg’s (2001b) balance theory of wisdom is also closely linked to metacognition, since it is about ‘how to think.’ (Sternberg’s work on intelligence [e.g. 1999] also places a high value on metacognitive ability.) His interest in wisdom as the deployment of factual and tacit knowledge with an eye to balanced ends also maps onto metacognition. The thinking skills that he proposes to teach (e.g. dialogical, dialectic, reflective) can form metacognitive strategies for goal-setting and monitoring one’s progress. Earlier generations of research on English language arts did not focus on its links with metacognition, but Marzano (1991) noted that research had shown metacognitive skills to have positive effects on subject comprehension (Resnick, 1987). A recent handbook of metacognition in education (Hacker, Dunlosky, & Graesser, 2009) outlined many connections between metacognition and the literacy and communication skills developed in language arts classes. Metacognition is seen as fundamental to coordinating the diverse set of skills that support reading and writing, and also appears to relate to learners’ increasingly complex self-regulation and self-monitoring of reading and writing processes. Thus, metacognition is considered to be a conventional, even fundamental part of learning in the English language arts. This cognitive process marks an intriguing connection between English education and wisdom development as conceived by Sternberg and the Berlin group.

2.7 Critical Literacy and Wisdom Teaching
The psychological views of teaching for wisdom suggest that supporting individual students’ thinking strategies is a path to learning about life and wisdom. But looking to great historical figures could help to illustrate a missing piece here. When considering notable figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Harriet Tubman, it is evident that the people that we call ‘wisest’ have done much to change the world, sometimes at great personal cost. Wisdom is not just about living a good life for yourself, when others’ needs must be taken into account. If wisdom is at least in part about social responsibility, then students must also be supported in the analysis and critique of power and oppression. One could argue that for students to truly learn about life, and to gain wisdom, their education must go beyond helping them to relate to their immediate social environment, or helping them to determine how to shape themselves to suit the larger world in which they find themselves. For many students, racism, sexism, economic inequality, and other forms of oppression mean that the world as it presently exists simply does not serve their best interests in life. If we really want all students to be best-prepared for life (and even to become wise), it seems insufficient to suggest that teaching for specific cognitive skills and providing facilitative experiences will be enough, on their own, to prepare students for a life that includes such challenges. One could argue that such concerns fall outside the purview of the present discussion, but that seems erroneous when the topic is as all-encompassing as ‘teaching for life and wisdom.’

Critical literacy education provides a path towards emancipatory learning (Freire, 1998) that empowers learners to combat social exclusion and challenge inequalities. The foundations of critical literacy are critique and cultural analysis, harnessed towards developing an understanding that texts (including literature) serve particular ideologies
(Luke & Woods, 2009). Status quo assumptions are up for debate in the classroom. Students’ lived experiences and the knowledges of marginalized groups take a primary role in this learning. Classrooms must be democratic spaces in which issues of “moral, social, and cultural significance” can be freely discussed (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 12). The goal of critical literacy education is to develop students’ capacity to understand and to reshape their worlds. While it would be an overstatement to suggest that critical literacy is a panacea to solve the world’s problems, critical empowerment certainly seems important to life and wisdom. And critical literacy’s compatibility with English studies makes it relatable to the current project. In fact, critical literacy is a part of education in Ontario, as I will discuss later (see ‘The Ontario Curriculum for English’).

Sternberg’s balanced curriculum is concerned both with individual thinking skills and with social responsibility, but its lack of a unified commitment to critical literacy undermines its value. Sternberg (2001b) is working from a deficit model of education: he views learners as unprepared for the challenges of adolescent life and the world at large, and seeks to ‘fill the gap.’ Supporters of critical pedagogy hold that this deficit view is incompatible with critical literacy education (Luke & Woods, 2009). However, Sternberg’s approach does share important ground with critical literacy. He hopes for students to begin to take an ideological view of knowledge, though he is less explicit in his phrasing. He proposes that:

students learn to appreciate the importance of multiple standpoints, the constructed nature of knowledge, and the powerful influences of one’s perspective on one’s view of the world. Wisdom requires one to see things not only from the
standpoint of one’s own interests, but also from the standpoint of the interests of others. (Sternberg et al., 2009, p. 109)

3. Prior Research on Teaching the English Language Arts

The present study is concerned with English teachers’ understandings and practices as they relate to life and wisdom learning in schools. Having looked at what psychological research has to say about wisdom and teaching for wisdom, I now turn to prior research on the purposes of English teaching, exploring intersections with psychological views of wisdom and teaching. I will also discuss the Ontario English curriculum in relation to these topics. Since the present study examines teachers’ views, I will look at how previous studies have investigated teacher goals, and how their findings could help to inform an experience-grounded and applied understanding of wisdom learning. Highlighted throughout this discussion is the pervasive presence of a ‘personal growth’ model for English teaching (and, to a lesser degree, a ‘cultural analysis/critical literacy’ model). These models appear to mirror some aspects of what ‘teaching for wisdom’ has been proposed to entail, as I will discuss.

3.1 Teachers’ Beliefs and Instructional Models

Clark and Peterson (1986) noted that research on teachers’ implicit theories and beliefs about teaching helps to make sense of the relationship between teachers’ systems of “beliefs, values, and principles” and the way that teaching is understood and enacted in the classroom (p. 287). Research on teachers’ beliefs is related to a variety of topics such as students’ needs, the role of the teacher, and the purposes of teaching (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Note that there is no standard set of terminology employed in research on views, beliefs, and implicit theories of English teaching. As such, the set of studies I
will review may not lend themselves to direct comparison. However, there are marked similarities between many of the trends described, and I will highlight these.

A review of implicit theory research in teaching demonstrates that thinking about teaching in ways that support the development of students’ wisdom is not solely the domain of psychological researchers. Personal life experiences are a part of teaching and learning English literature. English teachers themselves have long discussed the pedagogical and human value of “finding personal and social experiences worth sharing, and in the course of doing so, potentially making discoveries” (Dixon, 2009, p. 244).

I will begin to explore this research are by looking at different models of English teaching, and how they connect to teachers’ beliefs about teaching.

3.1.a Britain and the Cox models. Developments in English language arts education in Britain have provided fodder for a number of examinations of models of the subject, and teachers’ beliefs about those models. Over the past two decades, governments in Britain have undertaken major overhauls in secondary school English language arts education, instituting a national curriculum for English. Prior to this, English language arts teaching in Britain was not unified under one national curriculum.

It is important to note that the British research relates primarily to students aged 11 to 16; in the British education system only a minority of students study English as part of their Advanced-level (‘A-level’) university-preparatory studies at ages 16 to 18, although English is still “commonly regarded as the most important of all school subjects” (Goodwyn & Findlay, 2002, p. 226).

When the UK adopted a national curriculum for English in 1989, the controversy around the decision drove new research into British teachers’ views of the aims and
purposes of teaching English. Brian Cox headed a government-commissioned report of the new curriculum, in which he proposed five theoretical rationales for English teaching:

1. A ‘personal growth’ view focuses on the child: it emphasizes the relationship between language and learning in the individual child, and the role of literature in developing children’s imaginative and aesthetic lives;

2. A ‘cross-curricular’ view focuses on the school: it emphasizes that all teachers have a responsibility to help children with the language demands of different subjects on the school curriculum;

3. An ‘adult needs’ view focuses on communication outside the school: it emphasizes the responsibility of English teachers to prepare children for the language demands of adult life, including the workplace, in a fast-changing world;

4. A ‘cultural heritage’ view emphasizes the responsibility of schools to lead children to an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in the language;

5. A ‘cultural analysis’ view emphasizes the role of English in helping children towards a critical understanding of the world and cultural environment in which they live. Children should know about the processes by which meanings are conveyed, and about the ways in which print and other media carry values.

(emphasis mine; Cox, 1991, pp. 21-22)

These five rationales, although not formally constructed as a theoretical model, have been referred to as ‘the Cox models’ in literature on teaching (e.g. Goodwyn, 1992). Cox’s descriptions provided a new framework for research on English teaching in Britain, and
the accepted meanings of these models became more fully delineated as teachers’ own views were taken into account (e.g. Hardman & Williamson, 1993). Although Cox maintained that the models were meant to be a set of complementary approaches, not a definitive list of mutually-exclusive rationales, they set off immediate controversy. The rationales had been put forward as if they were of equal status and value, but investigators wondered if this was true, and whether teachers would agree with such an assertion (Goodwyn & Findlay, 1999). Hardman & Williamson (1993) noted the difficulty of accepting Cox’s claims about the models; in particular, they registered concern about fact that the cultural heritage and cultural analysis models seem to be opposed: how can one position one body of literature as being inarguably the finest and most culturally important, yet simultaneously teach students to criticize the sources of knowledge and the value orientations conveyed in literature? Goodwyn (1992) pointed to this issue as well. The divide between cultural heritage and cultural analysis models could perhaps be viewed in light of competing histories in the teaching of wisdom: some traditions (e.g. ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern schools) recommended rigid adherence to a doctrine of collected wisdom, while others (e.g. Aristotle) recommended that wise knowledge be considered flexibly, in light of situational concerns (Curnow, 2008, 2011). The degree to which a canon should be uncritically honoured, and the positive or negative effects of such a stance on learners’ life success, appear to be longstanding concerns in educational settings. This also recalls Sternberg’s (2001b) privileging of the ‘wisdom of the sages’ discussed earlier.

Goodwyn (1992) acknowledged that the Cox models are a “superficial synthesis” of the potential range of purposes of English teaching, but was curious about British
teachers’ own views of Cox’s five rationales (p. 4). He surveyed a representative group of 46 secondary and sixth-form English teachers, to see whether they related English teaching to the five models. Teachers overwhelmingly prioritized the personal growth model of teaching, although all of the models were accepted as relevant to the goals of teaching English. They also believed that the new national curriculum positioned personal growth as the strongest priority. Goodwyn (1992) reports that 70% of his respondents agreed that studying literature contributes to moral development, and none disagreed (the remaining 30% responded neutrally). Almost unanimously, teachers agreed that students’ personal responses to literature are important. Teachers also preferred using a range of texts over a narrow focus on the canon of heritage literature.

Hardman and Williamson (1993) replicated Goodwyn’s (1992) study with a group of 23 preservice English teachers in England (in the British system, these preservice teachers are called ‘postgraduate certificate in education students’). As in Goodwyn’s (1992) study, the respondents saw personal growth as the most important model. They also overwhelmingly agreed with the importance of valuing students’ personal responses to literature, and were interested in using a wider range of texts than those in the canon. One difference in responses between the two studies is notable: only 30% of the preservice teachers supported the ‘moral development’ purpose of literature. Hardman and Williamson suggest that this reflects a turn away from the nationalistic, monocultural view of English literature “as a bastion of cultural values” (p. 291). If this is a representative view, then it could be attributed to the different career stage of this group of participants, or we could consider this to be a reflection of the changing attitudes towards education held by different cohorts. Hardman and Williamson look to a historical
perspective, suggesting that changes in political and intellectual views of English education are the source of this turn.

In the same study, these authors also collected open-ended responses from the preservice teachers about each of the Cox models (Hardman & Williamson, 1993). On the whole, these responses reinforced that the personal growth model is seen as an important part of teaching English, both for teachers’ self-embraced roles and for contributions to students’ development. Personal growth learning, one teacher commented rather strongly, is the “only” way for students to develop their own views and identities (Hardman & Williamson, 1993, p. 286). A minority of the preservice teacher respondents had reservations about the feasibility of teaching for personal growth with large class sizes and the need to focus on other skills, and two respondents had concerns about placing the responsibility for personal growth in the hands of teachers. The cultural analysis model of critical media literacy education was seen as developing “the virtues of critical questioning, understanding, tolerance, and awareness” in relation to broader society, which connects to Sternberg’s (2001b) view of balanced thinking (Hardman & Williamson, 1993, p. 290).

Goodwyn and Findlay (1999) report the results of a 1997 follow-up survey about the Cox models, this time with 97 participants. Teachers still supported the use of all five models, and as before, 90% of teachers surveyed report a ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ preference for the personal growth model. However, only 10% still believed that the national curriculum supported personal growth. In open-ended comments, teachers noted that a curricular focus on the nationalistic cultural heritage model was affecting their ability to teach for personal growth. One teacher reported that the prescriptiveness of the
curriculum meant that “inappropriate” texts are taught at the expense of more relatable texts that would “foster more enjoyment and fruitful response from students” (p. 21). A different teacher noted that curricular constraints restricted teachers’ ability to select texts appropriate to different ability levels. Another expressed concern that heritage texts were “alienating students” (p. 21). A curricular bias toward texts that espouse white, male, upper-class perspectives was described by another teacher surveyed. The majority of teachers continued to agree, in similar numbers as the 1992 group, that literature helps moral development, but in even higher numbers (87%) they also supported critical literacy. One teacher commented on the politicized nature of teaching for moral development, noting that such a mandate encompasses a “huge issue [with] strong political overtones … English should not be a tool used by politicians to create a culture they wish to evoke” (p. 28). Goodwyn and Findlay concluded that the cultural analysis model (which, as noted above, links closely to aspects of Sternberg’s balance theory) had grown in influence. Teachers’ goals, while still encouraging personal growth in an individualistic sense, had moved more strongly towards educating for social responsibility.

Goodwyn and Findlay (2002) further examined how models of the purposes of teaching, including the Cox models, can help us to understand the tensions inherent in the competing demands of English teaching. Teaching the subject of English (like any school subject) means negotiating conflict among many possible subject definitions: the “multiple subject literacies” that dictate what should be taught, why, and how (Goodwyn & Findlay, 2002, p. 226). They describe a case study that focuses on the discourses of English teaching as constructed around the central activity of literature teaching. The
same teacher discussed and was observed teaching two different classes: a senior university-preparatory (A-level; year 12) class, and a year 9 ‘low/mixed-ability’ class. The A-level class was described as very teacher-directed, employing an academic treatment of literature focused on formal literary analysis and criticism. In contrast, teaching the year 9 class was about capturing interest and encouraging empathic and personal relationships with literature; as the teacher described it, “encourag[ing] pupils to enter into the characters, not just from an analytical point of view” (p. 233). Between the younger and the more senior classes, the status of the literary text changes: from a “stimulus” for discovering meanings, to “an object to be explicated” (p. 235). Goodwyn and Findlay argued that the year 9 example falls under a personal growth framework, as students’ identities are seen as necessary to their readings of the text. The formal academic teaching strategy in year 12 is less likely to “provide students with the means to reflect critically on what is being learned or take an active role in the production of knowledge and meaning” (p. 236). The formal assessment for which A-level students must prepare caused the teacher to avoid personal growth strategies and favour traditional academic and cultural heritage models. The constraints of the teaching situations can cause one teacher to teach the same subject very differently.

*Summary of research on the Cox models.* The surveys described above may not have represented the views of all teachers of English in Britain. Not all of those invited to participate returned their surveys, so the results likely reflect a response bias for teachers who are already invested in exploring the purposes of teaching.

However, these studies tell us something about English teachers’ views, at least for those working in Britain. Time and again, British teachers showed strong support for
a personal growth model of teaching that supports students’ life development. Although beginner teachers also subscribed to a personal growth approach, they were less attached to the idea of teaching morality through literature than more experienced teachers. In Hardman and Williamson’s (1993) survey, beginner teachers were connecting cultural analysis/critical literacy education to life, suggesting that it supports a balanced outlook on the world. By the time of Goodwyn & Findlay’s (1999) follow-up survey in 1997, teachers in general were expressing support for critical literacy, perhaps as a way to push back against the perceived drive towards cultural heritage teaching in the curriculum. Moral development remained a part of teachers’ view of English teaching, but cultural analysis approaches that expose students to diverse ways of understanding the world had increased in influence. Within each survey, there was consensus, but also points of difference. It is fair to say that the perspectives on the purpose of English language arts education presented here are not static or uniform. Teachers’ preferred instructional models are subject to the influences of career stage (and, potentially, cohort effects), and are subject to change based on policy-driven curricular expectations, the presence of standardized testing, and perceived student needs, among many factors.

3.1.b Earlier views of English teaching in Britain. In 1966, during an earlier era of curriculum reform, delegates from the national English teachers’ associations of Britain and the US met to discuss the purposes of English teaching and what quality in English teaching should mean (Dixon, 2009). Reflecting on this experience, Dixon (2009) wrote that student work is not “produced simply for the teacher’s benefit;” rather, it is a social activity and an imaginative experience (like Oatley [1999] discussed), one in which teachers play an important role. At the 1966 meeting, there was a tension between
those who valued the pedagogical role of the literary canon and those who desired to create spaces to acknowledge contemporary experiences of urban life. Dixon (2009) does not see these as irreconcilable aims; rather, he noted that “traditional titles … indicated fundamental themes, lurking underground in literature as in life”, through which students’ “personal experiences could be explored (and transformed) under the cloak of fiction” (brackets in original; p. 244). This linking of ‘fundamental themes’ and personal experience recalls the earlier discussion on imaginative experience. It is unfortunate that the ethnocentrism reflected in a focus on ‘traditional titles’ was not addressed by Dixon, but nonetheless, his comments seem undeniably important to the mission of teaching for wisdom, since, as I detailed earlier, explorations of wisdom and explorations of a good life are inextricably linked.

Dixon (2009) recalled that pupils’ personal development and maturation were also highlighted by teachers, and the activities of English class were noted as places where pupils make discoveries about themselves and “people in general”—very much in line with ideas about the knowledge base that could support wisdom (p. 247). The experiences of life, of our inner and outer worlds, and our ability to manage those experiences, are part of the imaginative simulation of engaging with literature (Dixon, 2009; Oatley, 1999). The view of the 1966 delegates was that a lived relationship with literature, rather than a disengaged literary analysis, should be encouraged by English education. This ‘growth’ model of English, focused on “shared experience” between teachers and students (Dixon, 1967, Klein, 1970) has been influential in English-language school systems around the world (though it has not always used as proposed, so it is important to attend to how models are defined; Green, 1990). In concluding notes, Dixon
(2009) acknowledged that the influx of critical theories into thinking on education, as well as the rise of international standardized testing, would come to diffuse the unified focus of teachers that was presented in the 1966 report.

Hardman & Williamson (1993) surveyed some of the changes in thinking about English language arts education in Britain in more recent times. They note that the kind of personal growth model of English education described in Dixon (2009) came to supersede the focus on the literary canon. By the 1980s, postmodern views of “the text,” as well as critical questions about moral education through literature, meant that critical media literacy was moving closer to the forefront of English classes. At least for educational researchers and theorists (although perhaps not for all teachers), critical theories began to affect thinking about the purpose of English education.

3.1.c Other research on models of English teaching. Siskin (1994) also described the primacy of a personal growth model in teaching. She conducted interviews and site visits with teachers in American high schools over a period of three years. In English departments, she noted multiple, coexisting views of subject matter and teaching approaches. But English teachers shared one common goal: they consistently took a student-centred, personal growth type approach to their work, prioritizing interpersonal connections and tailoring teaching to the individual needs of students. This sense of contact between teacher and students was said to depend on “connections [that] have to be established among the teachers and students and the texts” (p. 167). Teaching students ‘where they are’ in terms of interests is part of effective teaching in this growth orientation. The selection of literature was considered to be an important way to tailor the subject to suit individual students or classes.
Research with Canadian samples is scarce, but Skerrett and Hargreaves (unpublished paper, in Skerrett, 2007) found that Canadian English teachers “were more willing and able to adapt curriculum and teaching to meet diverse students’ needs and interests compared to their colleagues in math and science departments” (Skerrett, 2007, p. 120). English teachers, then, may be particularly equipped to teach in ways that connect with students, and especially motivated to do so. These authors were specifically interested in teachers’ handling of racial and cultural diversity, but their findings (important in their own right, of course) also suggest important possibilities for the kinds of personal growth and critical literacy/cultural analysis teaching models that could support wisdom. As Siskin (1994) and others noted, tailoring curriculum to individual needs is part of a growth model and supports student-teacher connections. Skerrett and Hargreaves also found that Canadian English teachers were concerned about time limitations and a focus on standardized tests; like some of the British teachers surveyed above, they felt that these tests restrict opportunities to personalize teaching, learning, and curriculum (Skerrett & Hargreaves, unpublished paper, in Skerrett, 2007).

A study of five American junior high English teachers investigated how teachers’ own reading practices had come to define their teaching (Zancanella, 1991). Each of the five teachers expressed different goals for their teaching, but four of five were aligned with goals that could be considered important for wisdom and life learning. These growth-oriented teachers were interested, respectively, in (1) guiding students “to know about other people and how they think” (p. 18), (2) taking a student-centred approach that emphasized relating students’ own experiences to the literature, (3) using texts as a window into different times and places, and (4) helping students to learn from the “great
thoughts” of great writers (p. 24). For the most part, these teachers “approach[ed] reading as imaginative experience … they hope to gain wisdom which parallels and extends that which they gain through real-life experience” (p. 25). Again, there is a connection to the importance of Oatley’s (1999) imaginative simulation. Importantly, Zancanalla also notes that wisdom is the goal of reading, and teachers in his study connect literature to the acquisition of wisdom. The fifth teacher expressed a strong preference for formal literary analysis, but also had some secondary interest in teaching for personal “insight” or for students “to take their own message” from the text (p. 15).

Zancanella (1991) also conducted classroom observations and student interviews. In the classroom, he determined, these teachers’ personal views are translated (via pedagogical content knowledge, discussed further below under ‘Teacher Knowledge’) into their individual ways of teaching literature. But, Zancanella found that this translation does not result in the perfect mapping of personal approach onto teaching strategy. The practicalities of teaching (i.e. the influence of curricular demands, administrative and departmental cultures, and standardized testing) caused teachers to recalibrate their practices (Doecke at al. [2007] made a very similar point). These ‘negotiated’ practices of classroom teaching (which have also been called the ‘curriculum in use’) fell on a continuum between ‘efferent’ (skills-focused) and ‘aesthetic’ (personal encounter/personal growth focused) teaching (Rosenblatt, 1985, as cited in Zancanella, 1991). Zancanella noted that the more experienced teachers in his study felt more comfortable standing ground in the face of such conflicts and teaching in line with their own beliefs. This finding, like others above, suggests that comparison of beginner and experienced teacher cohorts in the present study could be informative.
Farrell (1991) sorted research on instructional models in English into three prevailing models: ‘mastery,’ ‘heritage,’ and ‘process.’ The mastery model is focused on reading and writing skills, and thus intersects with the ‘cross-curricular’ and ‘adult needs’ views described by Cox (1991). The heritage model maps directly onto Cox’s cultural heritage model, and purports that schools should transmit the values of a culture, as expressed in literary texts. Farrell’s process model describes learning that focuses on meaning-making and honouring diverse readings of a text. Like Cox’s personal growth model, it is inherently student-centred. There is no counterpart to Cox’s cultural analysis model in Farrell’s categorization. Farrell noted that his models can describe emphases found in ‘top-down’ curriculum policy research, as well as in ‘bottom-up’ research on teachers’ views and experiences of how the subject of English is actually taught. He noted the ever-present discrepancies between theory, the prescribed curriculum, and the realities of teaching, and emphasized that the dynamic changeability of models renders them both difficult to depict and subject to change in the course of teaching practice, as demands dictate. Farrell’s review is more focused on research models than teachers’ views, but his review supports the assertion that instructional models are an important focus of research on English language arts teaching.

Problems with a personal growth model. Klein (1970) commented on the fact that social inequalities hinder the development of the trusting relationships between teachers and learners that a growth model demands. If we parallel teaching for wisdom (at least in part) with such a teaching model, then this criticism ought to be considered. Klein’s view of teachers’ ability to overcome such divides is markedly negative (writing of “the pathology of the teacher,” for example; p. 237). His context is that of an English
teacher working in American public schools of the 1960s, and perhaps somewhat
different from the contemporary Greater Toronto context. Klein recommended an all-
encompassing shift towards humanistic and student-centred schooling as a precondition
of successful personal growth teaching. Coming to a similar conclusion, through from a
different perspective, Green (1990) argued that growth models as-used have a functional
pedagogical value for teachers, but must be embedded in a robust critical pedagogy (e.g.
Freire, 1998) to build the positive social effects that one might imagine to result from
such models.

Wisdom as treated in psychological literature does carry a normative valence,
although theorists have attempted to appeal to a universal human ethic rather than to
impress a specific view of a ‘good life.’ As noted for growth models above, teaching
morality through literature is controversial. Eagleton (1985-1986) raised concerns about
the use of literature to transmit the values of the existing social order, values which may
not be reflective of the diverse experiences of students. In general, a variety of values will
be presented in the themes and characters of any complex work of literature, and the
decision over which values receive attention and promotion is a political one. Ultimately,
Eagleton argued, literary learning is generally not taken up in truly socially progressive
ways. Despite the existence of such reservations, one could argue that literature, when
presented in an appropriate critical literacy context, not only presents values, but can also
highlight places where social change is needed, or provide students with an opportunity
to question and reevaluate assumptions about the world (even if this is not customarily
done in so radical a way as Eagleton would argue for). Although discussion primarily
centred on growth models, two studies (Hardman & Williamson, 1993; Goodwyn &
Findlay, 1999) found that cultural analysis models which support critical literacy were considered important by teachers, and that the profile of such models was increasing over time. Goodwyn and Findlay (2002) found that formal literary analysis teaching, such as that used in British A-level courses, was incommensurate with a critical literacy type approach. This kind of critical approach appears to be of interest to researchers and teachers, but is not universally supported by present norms of teaching.

3.1.d Summary. Personal growth models of teaching are student-centred; focused on teacher-student connections, personal meaning-making, and students’ life development. They have enjoyed steady support from teachers across countries, and generations. It appears that personal growth models are compatible with psychological views of wisdom learning, providing facilitative opportunities to reflect on oneself and one’s life. Criticisms about the ‘real’ possibility of employing a growth model in the classroom have been raised, but are not necessarily prohibitive. The addition of a critical literacy approach, which trends suggest may be increasing in popularity, brings in the opportunity to reflect on significant assumptions about the world and students’ place in it. The evidence from research on instructional models suggests that English classrooms have excellent potential to act as sites of wisdom and life learning, and that such development may already be a part of English language arts education.

3.2 Teacher Knowledge

Another way to investigate English teachers’ understandings and practices is to examine teacher knowledge. What is the specific nature of teachers’ professional knowledge and skills, and how does this relate to their goals and practices in teaching? Such research can help to illuminate how goals are translated into classroom practice. Lee
Shulman (see Shulman, 2004, for a collection of his work) is a highly influential figure in the study of teacher knowledge. Shulman’s (1987) categorization of teacher knowledge includes content knowledge of the subject being taught, general pedagogical knowledge of how to teach in a classroom, curriculum knowledge, and knowledge of learners, educational contexts, and the purposes of education. The most influential piece of Shulman’s work is the delineation of pedagogical content knowledge (‘PCK’), which is the know-how of teaching a specific subject: where content and pedagogy meet in the understanding of the organization and presentation of subject material to a diverse group of learners. This particular “professional understanding” is thought to be “uniquely the province of teachers” (Shulman, 2004, p. 227). PCK has been taken up by educational researchers looking at a variety of topics, including English language arts teaching (e.g. Doecke et al., 2007; Grossman, 1989, Gudmundsdottir, 1991; Scarlett, 2009; Zancanella, 1991). These studies explore the specific knowledge held by English teachers, and further our understanding of teacher’s knowledge and beliefs about their teaching.

Grossman (1989) examined six case studies of beginner English teachers in the state of Washington, seeking to understand PCK in the context of secondary school English. As in the present study, she selected a sample of “the best and brightest” teachers to focus upon (p. 25). While this approach does not claim generalizability, she reports that her intention is to produce images of the best of ‘what could be.’ Grossman’s study is based on the idea that teachers’ “overarching conceptions of what it means to teach English” form one component of their PCK (p. 26). This part of PCK is formed in turn from teachers’ beliefs about the fundamental purposes of teaching English, their goals for students, and their curricular and cross-curricular knowledge of the subject.
Grossman (1989) found that teachers who had received formal teacher training (four participants had; two had not) saw secondary-school English as a place for student self-expression and communication, while untrained teachers were more interested in teaching literary criticism. Trained teachers saw literature as a starting point for students to develop skills and broaden their perspectives, and, as Grossman writes: “Implicit in these teachers’ conceptions of teaching literature was the belief that making connections between literature and students’ own experience is the major purpose for teaching literature at the high school level” (p. 26). In contrast, untrained teachers were focused on formalist literary interpretation. Grossman was interested in whether teacher education transmits (or, helps students to acquire and develop) PCK, and she found that three of the four participants who had engaged in teacher training attributed their student-experience-centred views to the influence of their Curriculum and Instruction professors. She therefore concluded that teacher training makes a difference in the PCK of beginning teachers, and that, for English at least, subject-specific teacher training is important.

Gudmundsdottir (1991) used the case study of an experienced English teacher to describe how a personal ‘pedagogical model’ (here, describing the set of techniques used for subject-specific instruction) forms a key part of PCK. This study also suggested that a teacher’s knowledge base forms a lens through which students are viewed, influencing student-teacher interactions.

Do English teachers themselves agree with Shulman’s (1987) conceptualization of PCK? In a qualitative interview study of 12 expert-nominated secondary English teachers, Scarlett (2009) found that teachers related PCK to their specific organization and presentation strategies of subject material, and to the way they respond to the needs
of individual learners. Knowledge of learners’ needs was understood through the ‘how-to’ knowledge of PCK.

But Van Manen (1994) criticized the PCK construct, suggesting that it is inappropriate to borrow “models of expertise and professionalism” from other fields to apply to teaching (p. 139). He defines teaching’s uniqueness in relation to the distinctive nature of teachers’ interactions with students: their immediate, normative, and relational qualities. He also critiques the notion of teaching as practical wisdom, arguing that reflective wisdom (*phronesis*) is not sufficient to define the wisdom of teaching. Van Manen believes that the practice of teaching must draw upon more than a “complex process of reflective decision making” (p. 140). Doecke et al. (2007) raised similar concerns. These authors acknowledge that PCK “constitutes a significant affirmation” of teachers’ knowledge, but like Van Manen, they suggest that the complex, interactional activities of the classroom context belie efforts to “anatomize” and categorize the meaning of what it is to teach English (Doecke et al, 2007, p. 15). Doecke and colleagues argue that no conceivable set of knowledge categories could possibly capture the entirety of what goes on in a classroom. With these reservations in mind, it remains the case that Shulman’s theorizing has been influential in cognitive views of teaching practice, and has provided a construct that respects teachers’ professional knowledge and experience.

**3.2.a Summary.** PCK has had a wide influence on research on teachers’ professional knowledge, and the studies reviewed above demonstrate how this has been taken up in research on the English language arts. By asking what teachers ‘know’ about teaching, we can begin to understand their aims and practices. Research employing the PCK construct has provided insight into the kinds of experiences upon which teachers’
attitudes are based; for example, Grossman (1989) suggested that teacher education plays an important role. In Grossman’s study, PCK helped to reveal what goals teachers hold in teaching, and how these goals can promote making life connections in the classroom.

Gudmundsdottir’s (1991) findings reinforced that teacher knowledge influences the nature of student-teacher interactions. Tailoring teaching to students’ needs is also part of PCK (Scarlett, 2009). Although PCK can be a controversial construct, it has helped to produce insights into teacher’s beliefs about the purposes of English teaching, and how best to achieve those goals.

3.3 The Ontario Curriculum for English

Since the present study examines English teaching in Ontario, it is worth examining the relevant curriculum to see whether the goals presented there share common ground with views of teaching for wisdom. The Ontario curriculum specifies the requirements to obtain a secondary school diploma in the province’s publicly-funded English-language schools. English is a required credit at each grade level (9 to 12) of the secondary school curriculum, largely because the English language arts are seen as a required basis for success across school subjects, and in life: “the basis for thinking, communicating, learning, and viewing the world” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 4). The majority of the guiding principles of English learning listed in the curriculum suggest an implicit correspondence with the notion of teaching for wisdom. Learners should:

\[\text{This includes schools administered by secular and Catholic school boards/school authorities, as well as federally-funded band-operated schools on First Nations reserves located in the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013; Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011).}\]
understand that language learning is a necessary, life-enhancing, reflective process; … make meaningful connections between themselves, what they encounter in texts, and the world around them; think critically; understand that all texts advance a particular point of view that must be recognized, questioned, assessed, and evaluated; … [and] use language to interact and connect with individuals and communities, for personal growth, and for active participation as world citizens. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 4)

The curriculum explicitly links English study to life, self-reflection, a personal connection to learning, and critical thinking. Through English study, students are meant to develop a sense of their social responsibility and their relationship to the greater world.

How does the curriculum direct teachers to address these skills? While all Ontario secondary students must complete required English credits, they do not all enrol in the same course. Compulsory English courses are streamed into three difficulty levels: workplace-preparation, college-preparation, and university-preparation. Specific expectations laid out in the curriculum extend across streams, but are applied in different ways. Expectations also differ by grade level. I will review material from the curriculum for grade 12, since teachers in the present study were asked to relate their responses to the context of a senior-level classroom. Two of the curricular expectations seem related to teaching for wisdom, as I have been exploring it in this study.

The first related entry notes that students are to demonstrate ‘extended understanding’ of oral and written texts. In part, this entails “making effective

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5 ‘Ability’ streaming is not without controversy: it has been criticized as reinforcing the existing social order through “early division and exclusion” of poor students and students of colour (Goodson & Medway, 1990, p. xiii; Apple, 2004).
connections between the ideas in [the texts] and personal knowledge, experience, and insights … and the world around them” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 97). The specifics of this endeavour change according to the stream (university-preparation, college-preparation, or workplace-preparation). For example, workplace-preparation students might be asked to compare a newspaper article about teenage life to their own experience; college-preparation students might read a magazine article about a successful athlete and compare their own values to the athlete’s; and university-preparation students might compare the personal and moral development of an adolescent literary character with their own experience. While all students contribute their own perspectives and experiences to the task, the level of abstraction asked of students increases with the difficulty of the stream.

The second related entry describes how students are expected to demonstrate ‘critical literacy,’ in which they must “identify and analyse the perspectives and/or biases evident in texts … commenting with growing understanding on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 97). In practical terms, workplace-preparation students might identify the conflicting values in two opposing opinion pieces; college-preparation students might determine examples of exclusionary language in a text; and university-preparation students might be asked to identify relevant perspectives that are not represented in an opinion piece.

In addition to the two entries above, metacognition is also highlighted in the curriculum, as a way for students in all streams to monitor their own progress and fine-tune their working strategies for oral communications, reading, and writing tasks (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).
Teachers’ responsibilities are also laid out in the curriculum. They are required to develop instruction strategies and assessments, with the underlying intention that students will “participate more effectively in their communities as responsible and active citizens” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). English-as-taught should “[provide] students with an awareness and appreciation of the culture that surrounds, challenges, and nourishes them” (p. 6). English teachers are seen as the deliverers of the curriculum, with the judgment to adjust the delivery to meet students’ needs. Teachers are also asked to use their discretion to direct activities toward “themes that are meaningful to students” (p. 28).

The selection of texts for study is also discussed in the Ontario curriculum, which states:

All students, regardless of their postsecondary plans [i.e. their academic stream], need to read a balance of exemplary literary and informational works that nourish the imagination, promote intellectual growth, contribute to a sense of literary appreciation, and provide a broad range of language models for their own writing. Literary works should be drawn from many genres, historical periods, and cultures to reflect the diversity of Canada and the world. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8)

This passage then indicates possible selections of poetry, novels, plays, and short stories from a range of Canadian and international authors. The curriculum indicates that literary texts are important for ‘imagination’ and ‘intellectual growth,’ as well as more traditional literary analysis and writing skills. In theory, at least, teachers and students enjoy a high level of freedom to select texts for classroom study, but Skerrett (2007) found that the
possibility of diversity did not mean that Canadian teachers strayed from the literary
canon. She noted that “predominantly Eurocentric and classical” texts held the highest
status in English classes (Skerrett, 2007, p. 354).

3.3.a Summary. Looking back to the reviews of wisdom and teaching, it appears
that some of the goals of the Ontario curriculum align with views of the nature of wisdom
and wisdom teaching. Of course, there are many other curricular goals that direct
attention to basic literacy and communication skills, not covered here, that compete for
teachers’ attention and classroom time. The Ontario English curriculum appears to
support education for the whole student, aiming for ‘life-enhancing’ outcomes and
community-oriented behaviour, which seems in line with teaching for wisdom. Reflection
(related to metacognition) and critical thinking also figure prominently in the curriculum,
suggesting that wisdom-related thinking skills could be developed in English class. In
fact, metacognition is explicitly part of the program of skills developed in senior English
courses, and one of the critical thinking criteria which teachers use to evaluate student

The specificities of teaching mean that policy and curriculum rarely have a one-
to-one mapping onto day-to-day classroom practices. The ‘curriculum in use’ (how
curriculum is applied in the classroom) and the ‘hidden curriculum’ (the learning that
happens in schools that falls outside of the curriculum) are important considerations when
attempting to understand the role of curriculum in teaching about life/wisdom. Skerrett
(2008) examined the English curriculum in use through interviews and site observations
with two groups of teachers in an American high school: a younger cohort of four
teachers with 1 to 12 years of experience, and an older cohort of two teachers each with
more than 20 years of experience. She investigated how teachers make curricular material relevant to diverse students. While Skerrett was interested specifically in multicultural and antiracist practices in English teaching, some of her conclusions are related to the present study. Skerrett noted that literature teaching was connected to life themes through teachers’ practices: “When the knowledge within classical literature was filtered through teachers, they brought into relief its embedded yet enduring themes about the human experience with which their students were also intimately familiar” (2008, p. 1818). This was true of both the younger and older teachers in the study. Where curriculum directives or teacher education did not provide the tools teachers needed to meet teachers’ personal instructional goals, they conducted their own research in order to be able to carry out the culturally-responsive teaching they valued. As I discussed in a previous section (see ‘Other research on models of English teaching’), Skerrett and Hargreaves (unpublished paper, in Skerrett, 2007) also drew attention to secondary English teachers’ desire and ability to tailor curriculum to meet their students’ needs, this time with a Canadian sample. Thus, the curriculum presents a starting point from which teachers’ practices may diverge in order to meet their instructional goals.

3.4 General Discussion

Research on teacher knowledge, instructional models, and teachers’ beliefs reveal connections between teaching and life, even wisdom, as English is already taught.

Research on teachers’ instructional models suggests that personal growth oriented models enjoy broad support. It appears that growth models of teaching share goals with wisdom learning: supporting students’ ability to understand their own thinking, to grow morally, and to learn holistically. A cultural analysis model, found to be increasingly
valued by teachers, uses literature to develop students’ critical ethical orientation toward the world. This model shares goals with critical literacy education, which I discussed earlier as a possible facilitator of wisdom.

Constructions of teacher knowledge such as PCK provide a way to theorize about teachers’ understanding of professional practice and their goals for teaching. Research on teacher knowledge has pointed to overlaps with the goals of teaching for wisdom, and provided some insight into the ‘how-to’ of translating such goals into practice.

The Ontario curriculum presents existing opportunities to teach for wisdom, as I have described, though the translation of curriculum into ‘curriculum in use’ means that the aims described in the curriculum may not map directly onto teachers’ aims or their classroom work.

Because the English language arts are a pivotal subject in English-language education, English can be a divisive area of research and practice. Demands of curriculum, policy, administration, teachers’ goals, students’ needs, and many other agendas construct the subject of English as a site of tension between a wise range of stakeholders, each with their own goals and perspectives. Teachers are particularly important figures in this domain, and so I turn now to the present study, which will look to their voices to understand the connections between English language arts teaching and wisdom.

4. The Current Study

The goal of the current project is to explore secondary school English teachers’ beliefs about the purposes and practices of English language arts teaching in the context of teaching for wisdom. There is little applied research on teaching for wisdom from
psychological perspectives, so this study aims to contribute to this emergent area of study. The two bodies of research I have described (psychological wisdom research, and studies of English teaching) inform my investigation. I will take a qualitative approach in this study, focusing on teachers’ own views and understandings of teaching for wisdom. This study examines both beginner and experienced teachers, allowing for an examination of the effect of career stage on beliefs about teaching for life and wisdom. In general, the goal is produce an experience-close account of English teaching as it relates to teaching for wisdom. I will also consider teachers’ accounts in the context of existing theories of wisdom and teaching.

4.1 Research Questions

A qualitative approach is well-suited to the investigation of novel research questions (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). In the present study, the primary research questions are exploratory, while secondary research questions are theory-driven (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The primary research questions are:

- What are English teachers’ beliefs about teaching for life/wisdom in the senior secondary classroom?
- How do teachers believe that curricular texts, and literature in general, relate to life/wisdom learning?
- What similarities and differences exist between the beliefs of beginner teachers and experienced teachers with regards to teaching for life/wisdom?

The secondary research question is:

- Where do teachers’ beliefs appear to intersect with, or contradict, existing theories of life/wisdom learning and theories of English language arts teaching?
5. Method

5.1 Participants

The 16 participants in the present qualitative study were drawn from a larger sample of English language arts teachers (n = 29) who participated in a mixed-methods study of expertise in English teaching. All participants were living and working in the Greater Toronto Area. Previous research has examined parts of this data corpus from different theoretical perspectives, such as expertise in teaching (e.g. Ferrari et al, 2011; Waugh, Ferrari, Allen, & Petro, 2012; Waugh, Peskin, Ferrari, Allen, & Petro, 2012), knowledge building (Ferrari, Peskin, Petro, & Weststrate, 2010), and connections with positive psychology (Ferrari & Guthrie, in press).

Due to the expertise design of the larger study, participants belonged to two career-stage cohorts: beginner teachers and experienced teachers. Beginner teachers had less than one year of formal English language arts teaching experience (generally preservice only, although some had limited experience in other areas such as supply teaching), while experienced teachers had a minimum of 10 years of experience. Participants from both career stages are included in this study, to capture a wider range of teacher experiences. Abbreviated notation (‘B’ or ‘E’) is sometimes used to denote a teacher’s career-stage cohort.

The pool of participants had been nominated as exceptional teachers/teacher candidates. Following accepted practice in expertise designs, selection for outstanding performance was based on nominations by knowledgeable supervisors (see Sosniak, 2006). Beginner participants were nominated by their Curriculum & Instruction course
instructors for their exemplary performance in the pre-service classroom teaching placement (practicum). Experienced participants were nominated by their principals or colleagues as exceptional teachers.

A formal expertise study privileges the knowledge of the ‘expert’ (more experienced) cohort, and considers the ‘novices’ (beginners) to be a less-skilled comparison group. However, the present study does not accept this *a priori* expectation. The analytical techniques used in the present study place equal value on the contributions of each cohort, within the context of their own experiences, social positions, and abilities, and with respect for the years of experience and learning that define the established professionals in this study. So rather than preserving the descriptors of ‘novice’ and ‘expert,’ I have opted to describe the cohorts as ‘beginner teachers’ and ‘experienced teachers.’ Like Grossman’s (1989) and Scarlett’s (2009) studies of secondary English teaching, the present study focuses on a group of ‘exceptional’ teachers without adhering to the *a priori* assumptions of an expertise framework.

Purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998) and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) were used together to determine the final group of 16 participants included in this study (8 beginner teachers, 8 experienced teachers; the ‘Analytic Strategy’ section below discusses this process in further detail). Table 1 (see next page) provides a description of participant characteristics in the final sample.

Pseudonyms are used to maintain teachers’ anonymity, and interview excerpts have been edited to remove identifying information (e.g. school names). As a group, I will describe the participants as ‘teachers,’ while acknowledging that some individuals
have limited teaching experience or were still seeking steady teaching work at the time of the interviews.

Table 1
Description of participants by cohort, years of teaching experience, and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beginner teachers</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ariel</td>
<td>preservice only</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>preservice only</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>preservice only</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deanna</td>
<td>preservice only</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>preservice, supply (&lt;1)</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>preservice only</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen</td>
<td>preservice only</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>preservice only</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experienced teachers</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allen</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greta</td>
<td>&gt;20</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Research Setting and Material Collected

Semi-structured interviews provided the data for this study. The semi-structured format provided rich data that touches on issues of importance for the participants, suitable for the analytical methods used in this study, while ensuring that the central research questions and concepts of interest were addressed (Charmaz, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration. The time and location of each interview was mutually agreed upon between the interviewer and the participant, usually taking place in a quiet, private location at the teacher’s secondary
school, or at OISE. Participants were reminded that they had the option not to answer any specific questions if they so chose. Interviewers were trained to use a specific set of questions to guide discussion, but the order of questions was adjusted at times to maintain the flow of individual interviews, and interviewers could ask follow-up questions and probing questions. Participants had the opportunity to direct the conversation to areas outside the interview protocol.

Participants were provided with three literary texts prior to the interview as material for discussion. The texts were selected for the original mixed-methods expertise study. The selection criteria were: (1) common use in the Ontario senior English classroom, (2) the presence of significant life themes, (3) genre diversity, and (4) brevity. The selected texts were: (1) Act I, Scene iii from William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*; (2) Bertrand Russell’s ‘What I have lived for,’ a short essay that is the prologue to Russell’s autobiography; and (3) *Bushed*, a poem by mid-century Canadian poet Earle Birney.

The interviews covered aspects of teacher identity and behaviour: how participants came to be teachers, their characteristics and behaviours, their strengths and weaknesses, and their approach to challenges. They were asked about their strategies for teaching the provided texts, and their thoughts on teaching students about life and wisdom. As reflected in the literature review, questions of life and questions of wisdom are thought to be closely intertwined. Teachers were also asked about ‘teaching about life’ because it was anticipated that wisdom might prove to be an esoteric or alienating concept.

Generally, questions about teaching the texts moved from teaching the texts in general, to using the texts to teach about life, to using the texts to teach about wisdom.
Teachers were asked to respond in the context of a senior-level English class in the Ontario secondary program. (See Appendix for the interview protocol used for this study.)

5.3 Analytic Strategy

The present study employs qualitative techniques. Taking a qualitative approach permits the researcher to develop an experience-close, context-rich response to research questions, and to conduct exploratory studies that are not bound to a priori hypotheses (Smith et al., 2009). In educational research, qualitative approaches have been employed in research on subject-specific instruction (including the English language arts) for the past 30 years, and mainstream psychology is currently experiencing the “incorporation and expansion” of qualitative methods (Erickson, 2011; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, p. 1).

Analytical techniques in the present study are based primarily in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (‘IPA;' Smith et al., 2009). IPA “focus[es] on personal meaning-making and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). With roots in phenomenological psychology, IPA honours individuals’ personal perceptions, rather than seeking claims to objective reports (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011; Smith, 1996). The IPA process is meant to shed light on the process of interpretation through which personal perceptions or meanings are determined (Smith, 1996). IPA is also psychologically-grounded in its “commitment to mind and cognitions” (Smith, 1996, p. 264). A previous study has successfully used IPA to study teachers’ beliefs and understandings about practices within a subject area: Joseph and Southcott (2010).
examined preservice music teachers’ beliefs about a new multicultural curriculum, exposing tensions between the mandated curriculum and preservice teachers’ experiences of the curriculum in use.

IPA draws from theoretical foundations in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, reflecting an interest in people’s lived experiences, as interpreted both by participants and by the researcher (double hermeneutics), with an emphasis on case-by-case analysis (Smith et al., 2009). With larger sample sizes, such as in the present study, analysis starts with individual cases, then moves outward, seeking patterns across cases. Because IPA was originally intended for use with small samples (e.g. n = 3; Smith et al., 2009), I brought in elements of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to organize the process of working with a larger sample. This is justified on the grounds that IPA invites researchers to tailor the process to the needs of the study and work flexibly within its guidelines. Grounded theory methods are also considered to be flexible, compatible with a variety of epistemological stances (Charmaz, 2006), and commonly applied in qualitative psychology (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008). These methods provide ways of working with data in a rigorous and systemic manner.

Following IPA guidelines, I began by familiarizing myself with the data, making sense of the general flow of the interviews, and noting specific anecdotes or descriptions that seemed particularly impactful for participants, where participants were drawing connections and placing importance. After the initial immersion in the data, the process of initial noting began. I generated an ideographic account (Smith et al., 2009) of each participant, as well as memos on potential themes (Charmaz, 2006). I made also descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments on the transcripts. This involved
considering *what* participants said, *how* they said it, and what *broader themes or connections* might be present at the individual case level.

Ideographic accounts generated from initial noting and memoing drove a theoretical sampling process when developing the final analysis. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to seek data that will shape and illustrate the emerging categories (themes)\(^6\) that the researcher has begun to define (Charmaz, 2006). This sampling happens concurrently with analysis, and categories (themes) continue to shift and develop as more participants’ accounts are added; this is part of the *constant comparative method* (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling involves selecting cases to fill out, diversify, interrogate, and check the accounts presented for a given theme or set of themes (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008); for example in the case of differing opinions on a topic, different ways of expressing a theme, or an apparent consensus in beliefs. This constructivist approach emphasizes the interpretive role of the researcher, which converges in purpose with IPA’s double hermeneutic approach (Smith et al., 2009).

Purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998) was carried out concurrently with the goal of a balanced count of participants from the beginner and experienced teacher groups in the final sample, with both male and female participants represented in each group (approximately two-thirds of participants were female and one-third male in the original corpus, and this ratio was maintained). I continued to sample from the larger corpus until

\(^6\) Charmaz (2006) differentiates between a category and a theme. She considers categories to be analytical, while themes are descriptive. Her discussion of theoretical sampling is concerned with higher-order analytical categories, not lower-level descriptive themes. But IPA’s units of analysis are referred to as ‘themes,’ even at the level of interpretation, so I will retain the use of that term.
both the objective of both sampling techniques had been satisfied. This saturation point was reached with a balanced sample of 16 participants (8 beginner, 8 experienced).

Iterative reading and re-reading of the data continued throughout the process of analysis and writing, allowing for the continuous refinement of themes and relationships between themes, and ensuring that the analysis reflected the full sample of data. Concept charting (in which themes are viewed together in a single chart; Lofland & Lofland, 1995) was conducted several times during the analysis to help to refine the connections between themes.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Note on the Presentation of Results

A qualitative study like the present one differs from a quantitative study in some formative ways: it does not claim wide generalizability, employ a broadly representative sample, or look to statistical measures as the benchmark of significance. Instead, the goal of the present study is to understand how the views of a specific group of teachers intersect with the possibility of teaching for life/wisdom. Claiming representativeness within the study is not the same as arguing for the representativeness of these statements for teachers in general.

Also, although frequency of comments is one way to measure importance (and one that I do employ), it is not the only measure of significance. Even a standalone comment that is meaningful to the participant carries weight in an IPA study (Smith et al., 2009).

To preserve the narrative flow of this account as much as possible, special notation is sometimes used to denote cohort group (B for beginners, and E for
experienced teachers, as described earlier). Where necessary, I will follow a quote with the participant’s name in brackets in order to clarify who is speaking.

As discussed in the Methods section, three texts were provided to teachers as starting points for discussion: a brief essay by Bertrand Russell called ‘What I have lived for;’ Bushed, a poem by Earle Birney with themes of wilderness, isolation, and survival; and a pivotal, prophetic scene from Shakespeare’s Macbeth (Act I, Scene iii). Where specific texts are the focus of comments, I will note this.

The results of the analysis fall under two superordinate themes: ‘Connecting texts to life’ and ‘Connecting teaching to life.’ The area of ‘Connecting texts to life’ is concerned with what teachers believe about the connection between texts and life/wisdom learning. The second area, ‘Connecting teaching to life,’ compiles what teachers believe about general teaching practices in relation to life/wisdom learning.

The superordinate themes are made up of first-order, second-order, and third-order themes. Second-order themes are considered to be subthemes of first-order themes, and third-order themes are considered to be subthemes of second-order themes. Table 2, under ‘Connecting texts to life,’ and Table 3 (see ‘Connecting teaching to life’ section) display the organization of themes.

6.2 Connecting Texts to Life

How does literature connect to teaching for life/wisdom? Analysis of participants’ comments suggests that they view literature as serving a variety of purposes that intersect in meaningful ways with the project of teaching for life or wisdom. Table 2, below, provides an overview of the themes that make up ‘Connecting texts to life.’
Table 2  
*Themes related to 'Connecting texts to life'*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-order themes</th>
<th>Second-order themes</th>
<th>Third-order themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Literature is inherently about wisdom | *Reading is a path to wisdom*  
*Wisdom is ensconced in texts*  
*Direct emotional connection*  
*Story makes us human* | | |

**Content-driven approach**

- *Interesting content*  
- *Themes in the text*  
- *Characters' actions*  

**Process-driven approach**

- *Call to action*  
- *Meaning-making*  
- *Personal writing*  
- *Self-text/experience-text connections*  
  - As a connecting theme  
  - As an entry point  
  - For student engagement  
  - Selection of texts  

**Reservations**

- *Not part of usual practice*  
- *Inappropriate/impossible*  
- *Skills focus conflicts with life/wisdom teaching*  

**Teaching texts for cognitive skills**

- *Critical thinking*  
- *Imaginative simulation*  
- *Self-reflection*  
- *Metacognition*  
- *Critical literacy*  

These themes include beliefs about the fundamental nature of the relationship between literature and wisdom, thoughts on best practices in teaching for life/wisdom using literature, concerns about the proposal of teaching for life/wisdom, and views of the
association between literary learning and cognitive processes. I will now report on these themes, and how they are connected to understandings of teaching for life and wisdom.

6.2.a Literature is inherently about wisdom. Could literature have a natural relationship with wisdom and life learning, as some historical and psychological approaches have suggested (Assmann, 1994; Curnow, 2008; Oatley, 1999; Robinson, 1990)? Some teachers discussed a sense that literature is inherently or inevitably about wisdom. This took different forms: from the deep life importance of reading, to a global view of wisdom as concentrated in texts, to more specific views of the emotional or sensory engagement provided by texts, to the deep human connection to narrative.

Reading is a path to wisdom. Three beginner participants (Carl, Thomas, and Emily) described a general sense that reading literature is inherently related to gaining wisdom. Carl noted that his grandfather, who he considers especially wise, gained his wisdom through reading. Thomas asserted that “everything that we’re reading, I think, you know, teaches us about life,” and that “most texts” can be used to teach for wisdom, if they are read with the intention of learning and applying life lessons.

Emily referred back to ‘What I have lived for’ and Bushed, and spoke of critical moments that characters face in texts: “At any critical moment in life I feel that wisdom really comes into play or you can gain wisdom.” These comments express a sense that encounters with literature have an inherent connection to wisdom. Following Oatley (1999) and Brockmeier (2011), we can connect these teachers’ views to a perspective on life learning based in imaginative simulation.

Wisdom is ensconced in texts. Some teachers suggested that wisdom is inherently present in literary texts, describing a direct wisdom-text connection. Emily (B) said that
“wisdom often comes out in literary texts,” while Frances (E) noted that “what literature and what our writings of our time really reflect” is “human philosophy, modern philosophy.” Kevin (E) suggested that poets are sources of wisdom. These comments argue for a view of a view of wisdom as ensconced in texts, and for Frances, the wisdom of a culture and an era is collected in its literature.

Taken together, these comments suggest that reading a text is a particularly important kind of personal encounter with wisdom, and considered to have a special value for life. The notion that written materials can be ‘vessels of wisdom’ is part of wisdom’s long history (e.g., Marrou [1964] discussed how the wisdom of the poets was a focus of literary study in Hellenistic schools). Such a view is also reflected in the position held by proverbs in the Berlin wisdom paradigm, and by the historical status of proverbs in ancient Near Eastern traditions and the Old Testament (Assmann, 1994).

**Direct emotional connection.** Two experienced teachers (Allen and Tina) discussed the importance of the direct, emotional self-text connection in relation to teaching about life. For Tina, the emotional aspect can even be “the most important aspect of the text.” Gaining life knowledge or wisdom from literature, then, is not only about analyzing characters or themes. It can be a direct, even sensory relationship. As Allen said, “that’s what poetry does. It slows life down frame by frame, but it’s, hmm, it’s intense sensations, what is poetry designed to do, to make you see, to make you feel.” Some texts, then, could teach about life in immediate, impressionistic ways. This emotional connection recalls the ‘personal truths’ valued by Oatley (1999), who saw an affective connection as key to life insight.
Story makes us human. The connections between narrative, self, and wisdom also point toward literature’s inherent value for life and wisdom. In line with theorists such as Ricoeur (1992) and Bruner (1997), Greta (E) talked about the idea that story is what makes us human. In describing the provided texts, she said: “All of these pieces are stories, they tell stories or parts of stories, and it’s stories that make us human.” She returned to this idea when discussing how she defines herself as a teacher:

I want them [students] to take away a love and appreciation of the role of story in their lives because that can be a part of your life regardless of what you do, and so that’s really important to me. And I think it really does define how I see myself as a teacher. It’s, um – yeah, it’s trying to help people be human and see other [people as] humans and let other people see them as human.

Greta sees an appreciation of narrative as something that benefits all students. She connects this to the opportunity that teachers have to influence young people’s development, making an important link to teaching that supports life and wisdom learning. Her comments also connect back to Brockmeier’s (2011) notion of the narrative social mind: for Greta, too, story is what connects individuals to life’s greater meanings. I will return to the narrative-wisdom connection in the General Discussion of results.

Renee (E) called the provided texts “universal in terms of - of you know, speaking from the human, human condition.” Allan (E), too, described literature in general as a source of universal, lasting human truths (see ‘Teaching texts for cognitive skills’ for more on his comments). Not all teachers argued for universalities and some argued against this concept, as I will discuss in the ‘Reservations’ section below.
6.2.b A content-driven approach. Not all teachers believe that literature is inherently connected to wisdom. But do they connect literature to life? How? Teachers saw the potential for wisdom or life learning in specific characteristics of texts: topics, themes, characters. While many teachers were comfortable appealing to an inherent or universal wisdom in texts, they also looked to other strategies to teach about life or wisdom. These ‘intrinsic’ and ‘strategic’ views are not mutually exclusive, as aspects of a strategic, content-driven approach were discussed by all participants (note that a discussion section on ‘Universally-supported themes’ will revisit topics discussed by all participants).

Interesting content. Content-driven strategies were highlighted in teachers’ comments about selecting texts for the classroom. Deanna (B), Bob (B), Holly (B), Sophie (E), and Allen (E) recommended seeking texts that students will like or find interesting. Otherwise, Deanna (B) said, “they won’t want to apply it to themselves.” She suggested that texts must contain interesting or relatable content in order for students to find life lessons there. Bob (B) said that an important part of his job is “getting kids enjoying learning in life,” which is impossible with “what they see as outdated poems, and outdated drama.” But he still tries to make connections with contemporary experience, like illustrating Macbeth’s temptation by describing “Macbeth thinking about Jell-o shots.” These five teachers suggested that the content of texts must be accessible and relatable in order for students to learn about life in the classroom. This view suggests resistance to a cultural heritage teaching model, and support for a personal growth model geared to individual needs. The Ontario curriculum allows teachers to select appropriate texts, as these teachers recommend, though this may not always be possible in practice.
**Themes in the text.** All of the teachers saw a natural connection between Russell’s essay and life themes. In the Ontario curriculum, teachers are meant to use themes to ensure that learning is meaningful to students, so this universal connection reflects expected practice in teaching. Experienced teacher Greta echoed a common sentiment about the content of the three texts: “I mean this [Russell’s essay] is the most obvious one when you teach about life. Yes, here is somebody writing about his own life and about the things that have motivated him and made his life important. You can find those in the other two pieces as well, but you have to dig a little more deeply, it’s not quite as upfront.” Deanna (B) also found Russell’s essay to be an “easier” source of relatable, “universal” themes. All teachers saw a natural connection between Russell’s essay and life themes. Allan (E) saw life themes in Russell’s essay, but argued that teenagers do not have the necessary life experience to really understand Russell’s arguments and to find wisdom there.

Teachers commonly looked to specific themes to connect texts to life learning and wisdom. The way that teachers discussed the life themes of greed and materialism provides an illustrative example of their diverse perspectives. Three beginner teachers (Ariel, Jen, and Carl) commented on materialism as a specific ‘social ill’ that they hoped to address through teaching literature. When we live in a “consumer-driven society,” Macbeth’s greed is not “all that far removed from your life experience” (Ariel). Carl, rather traditionally, saw “What I have lived for” as a reminder that we must challenge ourselves to live up to our values in the face of a “decadent” society. Jen took a “social justice” stance, making a connection between Macbeth’s greed and the willingness to purchase sweatshop-made goods. These comments illustrate the diversity of ways in
which teachers can approach a desired theme, through different texts or even the same
text. The universal reports of connecting texts to life through themes suggest general
acceptance of a personal growth view of teaching, though they also illustrate that the
same goal can be expressed in different ways, as Zancanella (1991) found.

**Characters’ actions.** Teachers also suggested directing students’ attention to
characters’ actions and decisions as a teaching strategy. Frances, Greta, and Sophie
(experienced teachers) suggested drawing students’ attention to specific problems faced
by characters, and characters’ responses to those problems. Frances had the most explicit
suggestions along these lines, suggesting, for example, that *Bushed* could be discussed in
terms of the narrator’s dilemma: how do you face a difficult situation? “The concept of
active or passive approach to a problem. So when a problem arises are you active or are
you passive, what are the positive aspects of being active or passive?” She would do this
by pairing the poem with a pop song that explores a similar theme. Holly, a beginner,
suggested drawing attention to the fact that “Macbeth lies to himself, like every human,”
so that students can learn from this character’s example. This links back to Oatley’s
(1999) concept of literature as a ‘laboratory space’ for life paths.

**6.2.c A process-driven approach.** Some participants saw opportunities to teach
for life/wisdom by encouraging particular ‘modes of interaction’ with texts. One teacher
hoped that he could guide students to see a text as a ‘call to action.’ Other teachers
discussed encouraging meaning-making through texts, and some commented on using
texts as a stimulus for ‘writing from the heart.’ All teachers were interested in drawing
out students’ self-text and experience-text connections, and had diverse suggestions
related to this strategy.
**Call to action.** Bob (B) hoped that his students would interpret Russell’s essay as a direct call-to-action to volunteer or give back to the community in some way. He recalled Russell’s statement: “‘I long to alleviate the evil but I cannot and I do suffer,’ where it’s like he can’t help, or he sees that he can’t help. And so for me, that that would be my little poke and prod to the kids.” He sees the text as a stimulus to help students to improve their lives and the lives of others, and in doing so, to avoid the suffering that Russell describes. This seems to align with ancient views of ‘wisdom as a way of being’ (Hadot, 1995).

**Meaning-making.** In a few cases, literary texts were described as tools for personal meaning-making. Jen (B), Renee (E), and Frances (E) connected this process to their teaching. Jen saw poetry as “a means for them [students] to create their own meanings.” Renee believed that the best and wisest English teaching is “setting up a class that's engaging, motivating and interesting, with the best possible texts, that - and then, activities that allow for students to make meaning from those texts.” She clearly values meaning-making as a goal of her teaching. Frances connected meaning-making to more than personal engagement. She would ask students to make meaning by considering both their own perspective on a text and by “bring[ing] in other voices” to challenge the primacy of the text. These three teachers hope that students will use meaning-making as a tool to guide their reading. Theorists have connected meaning-making to critical thinking. In Philosophy for Children (Lipman, 2003), meaning-making is said to support student engagement within the classroom community of inquiry.

**Personal writing.** Two experienced teachers, Renee and Sophie, saw the importance of using texts as stimuli for personal writing. Renee saw Russell’s essay as
providing an incentive for students to move away from academic writing to connect deeply with a subject, “writing from the heart.” Sophie also valued personal writing, even suggesting that this mode of interaction could drive students’ best work:

I mean, yes, the analysis is important too, but it seems to be that the very best insights that students have come up with, very often, [it] happens when they’re doing something creative, where they’re taking their own experience and their own imagination and they’re mixing that together with the text.

Both Renee and Sophie held a heart-felt or generative approach in high regard. Arndt’s (2003) and Labouvie-Vief’s (1990) wisdom theories connect wisdom with the world of emotion. The emotional connection implied in personal writing also recalls Oatley’s (1999) thoughts on life insights through ‘personal truths.’

**Self-text/experience-text connections.** Personal writing is one way that students could connect their selves or lived experiences to a text. Encouraging these self-text/experience-text connections seems to be fundamental to the way that English teachers approach their subject. Every teacher mentioned this teaching strategy in relation to Russell’s essay (though this was likely influenced by the content of Russell’s essay, which lends itself easily to self-text connections). Tina (E) called self-text and experience-text connections “typical” in teaching, so it is not surprising that such connections were described in relation to all three of the sample texts. Teachers reported using these connections to build units, to provide an entry point for students, to support student engagement, and to assist in the selection of texts. These discussion points provide important insights for teaching for life/wisdom.
As a connecting theme. Several beginner teachers (Jen, Thomas, and Deanna) and one experienced teacher (Greta) discussed life/wisdom as a possible theme to connect texts to one another or to build study units. Greta (E) discussed her goal of centring course units around life themes. Although Jen (B) found wisdom to be “a really ambiguous term,” she still saw it as a thematic way “to connect all these texts. And if I had that as my objective … you know I would begin with that and then design my lesson from there perhaps beginning even with … questioning them about what is wisdom and what does that mean? And you know moving forth to the texts.” Thomas (B) also suggested that life is a common theme among the provided texts:

I mean I think that all of the texts can be connected through this idea of, what is life really all about? Right? And like how do we get to where we are? Um, which I think is super relevant to a grade twelve class right, because they’re at that stepping, they’re that, that like, um, jumping off point right, into like university life or work life or college life.

Thomas and Jen’s comments reflect an organizational role for life/wisdom themes. As they described it, this could provide an opening for student-led conversations about wisdom, or highlight experience-text connections for students, helping school to feel “relevant.”

Texts for this study were selected to provide several different genres for teachers to examine, and it is possible that Thomas and Jen saw this as an invitation to build a thematic study unit. If so, this thematic connection could be a relic of the study design, rather than a portrayal of what teachers would ‘really’ do. Deanna (B) said that she would
be hesitant to use the word “wise” with students. If she were teaching the Russell essay to students, she said:

I would ask them to reflect upon three things that they think have made them wise in their life, hmm, but I probably wouldn’t use the word ‘wise’ because most students in grade 12 don’t consider themselves wise, because they spent up to this point, their entire lives being told that they’re not wise enough to make their own decisions.

Deanna’s comments suggest that she sees wisdom as an inappropriate theme for her students, given their life stage. She is not necessarily suggesting that wisdom is developmentally-inappropriate; rather, her students have not been permitted to see themselves as wise, so she anticipates that they will not connect with the term.

Using life and wisdom as an organizing theme could suggest a surface-level engagement with teaching about life or about wisdom, rather than the embedded approach that Sternberg (2001b) has suggested, though he too advocated for the organization of units around various ideas related to wisdom.

*As an entry point.* On a basic level, self-text and experience-text connection can be harnessed as a pedagogical tool, an ‘entry point’ for students to access a text.

Beginners Jen, Carl and Thomas said that a “good method” is “to start there with the, sort of, the life lessons part of it, or the connections to life, and then you move into, sort of, the text” (Thomas). For *Macbeth*, Carl recommended a graphic novel version of Shakespeare as an “awesome way to bridge, hmm, sort of contemporary ideas with the historical.” Four experienced teachers (Tina, Allen, Greta, and Frances) also described
connecting texts to life as a way to bridge student’s access to a text. This adds to the body of evidence for a personal growth model among the teachers in this study.

*For student engagement.* The same group of experienced teachers (Tina, Allen, Greta, and Frances) who saw self-text or experience-text connections as an entry point also expressed views that pushed beyond this idea. These connections, deeply interwoven into their teaching strategies, were seen as key to student engagement. Texts that do not have immediate, contemporary relevance for students must be connected to life in order to make them meaningful, and this is part of a teacher’s work. As Tina (E) said:

[I] gotta make it relevant for them, like, Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, who cares? Why - why does it connect to today, why is it relevant, why is it meaningful and what can we learn from this? So I’d have to make the present day connection to characters, um, to people, and with ideas.

Allen, Greta, and Frances made similar statements, but Frances extended her treatment of Russell’s essay further:

I’m personalizing it for the student, what do you live for? …I would want students to negotiate that question through some different lenses particularly because this essay’s one lens and there hasn’t been, there weren’t other essays to support that, to make it differentiated.

As discussed above in relation to meaning-making, Frances looks to connect texts to a variety of perspectives, driving the self-text connection to serve more socially-critical purposes. This is in line with a cultural analysis/critical literacy approach to teaching. Greta (E) also had a wider vision of connecting the text to life: for her, the self-text connection is essential to designing engaging courses that “bridge the disconnect that
most of them [the students] see between the world of school and the world outside.” Such a focus on supporting students’ personal connections to learning is further support for a personal growth model of teaching.

Selection of texts. Some teachers commented on how the choice of texts can affect self-text and experience-text connections, linking this to student engagement. Allen, Sophie, and Kevin (all experienced teachers) suggest that it is important to include texts with writers, content, and contexts that students will feel motivated to connect with. The Russell essay emerged as a particular point of contention, with three teachers referring to it as “outdated” (Ariel [B], Holly [B], Joshua [E]). But one beginner, Emily, thought it was the “most accessible” of the three texts discussed in the study, and as a whole teachers had no trouble connecting Russell’s essay to students’ lives. Holly (B) suggested harnessing this tension as a teachable moment and asking students explicitly, “is it outdated for your generation?” Her suggestion demonstrates a student-centred approach which considers students’ views and experiences to be valid knowledge. Together, teachers’ comments about selecting texts illustrate the multiple competing views that teachers hold about their work, as well as how their literature choices are meant to encourage students’ immediate connections. Interestingly, these were two of the most characteristic aspects of English teachers’ instructional models in Siskin’s (1994) study.

In general, both beginner and experienced teachers were committed to encouraging self-text and experience-text connections in their teaching. These connections were seen as an important way to engage with students, reflecting a personal growth model of teaching. Building units around life/wisdom also recalls Sternberg’s (2001b) wisdom teaching proposals.
6.2.d Reservations. Although connections between life/wisdom and literature were present in all 16 interviews, teachers were not equally supportive of directing these connections towards the goal of teaching for life/wisdom. Reservations were expressed in three main areas: first, that teaching for life/wisdom is not compatible with current approaches to teaching literature; second, that wisdom is an inappropriate goal for teaching; and third, that a focus on ‘hard skills’ is directing attention away from life-related ‘soft skills.’

Not part of usual practice. Some teachers acknowledged that life connections or wisdom could be found in literature, but would require an approach that diverges from the usual practices of English teaching. Carl (N) and Joshua (E) could each come up with a strategy to teach about life using Macbeth, but under regular circumstances, neither “would never even dream of [it]” (Joshua). Thomas (B) saw wisdom in Bushed but he was hesitant about using this text for wisdom: it would require a departure from his usual teaching strategies and “a lot more” collaborative work. But Allen (E) had no difficulty finding an experience-text connection with Bushed, suggesting: “Maybe have them describe a place that they that means something to them... this is [about] a place that obviously meant a lot to Earle Birney.” This comment about Bushed was unique to Allen, and suggests a creative-minded approach to finding connections to life.

A few teachers suggested that some standard teaching strategies prevent accessing a self-text or experience-text connection. Ariel (B), Deanna (B), and Renee (E) criticized the way that Shakespeare is taught. They said that by treating Shakespeare’s plays as written texts, rather than theatre, the “live, living, breathing” part is lost (Ariel, B). These
teachers suggested that the method of engagement with a text affects student engagement and can support or limit opportunities to connect the text with life.

Greta’s (E) comments suggested that she is very engaged with connecting teaching to life and experience, but she saw wisdom as “one step beyond.”

Wisdom is when you don’t just study texts as texts but you have to look at them in a very personal way …that can only happen when I’m interacting one on one with that text without somebody there saying, “no no no, this means this.” … This is what is difficult for a lot of teachers, because a lot of teachers will come in and take a piece of literature and they have a particular view of what it is and what it means and they go at it from that perspective and sort of eliminate others.

Greta’s view of acquiring wisdom from literature relies on a personal connection with the text, free from outside opinion or evaluation. She suggested that many teachers would not support this kind of connection in the classroom.

Interestingly, some teachers did comment on the importance of validating multiple readings of a text, rather than a single ‘canon view.’ Five beginner (Ariel, Jen, Carl, Holly, Bob) and three experienced teachers (Greta, Frances, Sophie) made comments expressing their commitment to honouring multiple, situated readings of texts. As Carl (B) said, “I really think it's important for students to develop their own opinions rather than, …‘I'll tell you what it's saying.’” So while Greta’s reservations about teaching for wisdom are likely well-founded in her experience, there are definitely teachers who oppose a ‘canon view.’ The majority of the beginners in this study agreed with a ‘multiple readings’ view, so perhaps it is becoming more entrenched in the English
language arts. These comments valuing students’ inquiry into texts suggest a trend towards a critical literacy/cultural analysis model of teaching.

**Inappropriate/Impossible.** Some teachers considered wisdom to be an inappropriate or impossible goal for English teaching, and did not consider self-text or experience-text connections to serve this purpose. Kevin and Joshua, two experienced teachers, reacted negatively to the idea of teaching for wisdom. Kevin described wisdom as being beyond the sphere of English teaching:

> If you’re trying to give a student wisdom, I think you should be a poet or a, you know, a religious leader, or uh, what else, I don’t know, I guess that like, I don’t think that - I don’t think that’s what we do.

Kevin doesn’t think that English teachers are (nor should be) ‘wisdom teachers.’ He related this to his desire to do what is best for “the struggling student.” He believes that wisdom is too far removed from day-to-day experience to be meaningful to students.

Joshua also conveyed serious reservations about teaching for wisdom:

> I would be very suspicious of wisdom. Um, I’m very suspicious of, any one or any thing that feels, “Yeah, I know what the answer is!” … The best thing that you could do is go back to Socrates and just be aware of how little you and me know.

Both Joshua’s and Kevin’s reservations are based in a view of wisdom as rare and far-removed from most people’s experiences. These teachers do not equate teaching about life (or connecting teaching with lived experience) with teaching about wisdom. Joshua sees literature as a reflection of the “complex emotions and desires” that people experience, but for him, this serves to reinforce the fact that we live in “a world in which
wisdom is very rare.” Thus, it is not for him (or his students) to attempt to approach wisdom. Although teaching for wisdom has been a topic for millennia, in recent centuries, this has not been a priority in education (perhaps since as long ago as the Hellenistic schools; Marrou, 1964; Hadot, 1995). Wisdom is not an explicit part of current schooling, nor are its suggested components such as judgment, at least according to Sternberg (2001b) and Lipman (2003). So, it is not surprising that teachers would have a variety of reservations about teaching for wisdom, culminating for some in outright rejection of the idea.

**Skills focus conflicts with teaching for life/wisdom.** Seven participants (Joshua, Kevin, Renee, and Allen [E]; Jen, Deanna, and Holly [B]) discussed how a focus on ‘hard skills’ such as literary analysis affected their teaching. Some communicated their belief that a skills focus may be incompatible with teaching for life/wisdom. As Joshua (E) put it, in his comments about *Bushed*:

> You know the - one of the sad things about teaching grade 12 is the obsession with marks – they [students] have no choice. So at my school, everyone goes to university, or, you know, ninety percent. So we can’t just fool around with things very much. The kids want to know, “how can I deconstruct this poem, how can I analyze this poem most effectively so that I can do the same on an exam or on a test?” And um, and so it’s actually a little less fun teaching poetry at that level. He added that if he had the choice, he would “have a lot more fun with” teaching, and allow for more student-led exploration. But in a school where a skills focus is demanded, he must adjust his teaching to those needs.
A skills focus is not solely the domain of those who work with the most privileged or able students. Allen (E) expressed his sense that the move away from an aesthetic or personal focus on literature to a skills focus is widespread, rooted in changing directives from the Ministry of Education. Kevin (E) said he values a skills focus because “in this province, we have illiterate students, you know, we have in some schools in this city, half the kids can’t pass the grade 10 literacy test. So I’m interested in teaching skills.” When asked directly, he answered that he is “not interested in teaching about life” when he sees students facing such challenges. He believes that it is his job to teach students the practical communication skills they seem to lack.

Some teachers, like Jen (B), talked about how this skills focus is stressful, even “intimidating” for students and for teachers. Renee (E) remembered how both students and teachers were “really stressed” when the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test was introduced as a mandatory requirement in secondary school education. And Deanna (B) recalled feeling pressure when “the parents want their kids to get ahead ... so they basically put them in these higher [level] classes even if they don’t completely have the skills yet. And they expect me to teach them the stuff.” With teachers and students stressed about ‘hard skill’ acquisition and marks, it seems less likely that ‘soft skill’ development (like students’ life/wisdom learning) will be prioritized.

But Holly (B) took a different stance. She thought that making personal connections with literature (e.g. reader-response journaling) is a good way to “keep

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7 This provincial standardized test was instituted as a requirement of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma for students starting grade 9 in the 2000-2001 school year, and for all cohorts thereafter (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Students must pass this test, usually in Grade 10, or must complete an equivalent credit course if they are unable to pass the test (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).
[students] motivated without bogging them down with too much of the - the formal stuff.” In the face of high-pressure, credentialist moves in education, a self-text or experience-text connection could help to keep students interested and inspired.

But a skills focus, whether it is concerned with advanced literary analysis, or more basic ‘cross-curricular’/‘adult needs’ skills, was mainly seen to be incompatible with connecting teaching to life. This divide recalls Goodwyn and Findlay’s (2002) case study, where the demands of formal teaching strategies caused a teacher to avoid personal growth strategies.

6.2.e Teaching texts for cognitive skills. ‘Hard skills’ like communication and literary analysis do not incorporate the full complement of skills that students might need to lead a ‘good life’ or develop wisdom. As I discussed in the introduction, psychologists have proposed that there are specific psychological processes that support wisdom and life learning. Teachers brought up certain wisdom-related cognitive skills, and noted that they were important to literary learning. Critical thinking, imaginative simulation, self-reflection, metacognition, and critical literacy were all discussed by teachers in this study, and I will now report on their views of these concepts.

Critical thinking. Four participants (Carl, Bob, and Ariel [all B], and Frances [E]) discussed developing critical thinking skills as part of the study of literature. Carl connected critical thinking to the ability to engage with multiple viewpoints, and he is concerned that “not many students realize what it is to be a critical thinker, not to just shut down people that have different views but to engage with them.” He sees promoting this kind of discourse as part of his particular role in the classroom. Bob and Ariel talked about encouraging students to “argue their point with evidence” (Bob) and not to “take
things at face value” (Ariel), while Frances wants her students to ask “critical questions.” As a learning goal in the Ontario curriculum, critical thinking is institutionally valued as an outcome of English language arts education. But teacher comments in this study present critical thinking as an important life skill that is more than text analysis, like Sternberg (2001b) and Lipman (2003) proposed. Sternberg’s balanced curriculum for wisdom highlights critical thinking, and by looking at the curriculum and these teacher comments, we can see that it is already a part of the English classroom.

**Imaginative simulation.** I have indicated numerous places where the themes of ‘Connecting texts to life’ intersect with the ideas of Oatley (1999), and so it is interesting to see that a few participants commented overtly on the opportunity for imaginative simulation provided by texts, and connected this to life/wisdom. Ariel (B), Tina (E) and Frances (E) each saw opportunities in literature to explore alternative paths and learn outside of one’s own experience. Another experienced teacher, Allen, recalled the value of his own vicarious literary experiences:

> You know, I’ve learned from characters in novels. … Characters facing pressures, difficult pressures, more difficult often than the reader would ever face, tragedies. Look at Macbeth, Lear, Hamlet. These are all characters who are thrown in very difficult situations. How do they deal with it? … They’re [presenting], you know, abiding truths about human experience.

Allen believes that by entering these characters’ worlds, he can learn from their experiences. It is interesting that Allen, whose interview reflected a general belief in situated knowledge, rather than universal values, sees literature as a space where “abiding truths about human experience” can be found. Thus, it seems that literature could be a
unique vessel for human wisdom, and imaginative simulation could be related to how we access this wisdom. I will discuss imaginative simulation further in the ‘General Discussion’ section.

**Self-reflection.** Teachers connected the Bertrand Russell essay very strongly to self-reflection, with 15 of 16 teachers (all but Bob [B]) recommending that students engage in a reflective activity (usually journaling or more formal writing such as a personal essay) when studying the Russell text. Both beginner and experienced teachers talked about self-reflection as an opportunity for students to learn about themselves, and to connect their self-knowledge to the way that they relate to the world around them. Ariel (B) even called this the “most important” aspect of teaching the Russell essay to a grade 12 class. But when it comes to making stronger claims about why self-reflection is important, teachers had more diverse views. Beginners Thomas, Jen, and Holly were willing to connect self-reflection directly to gaining wisdom, but experienced teacher Joshua said that while self-reflection was “valuable,” he didn’t connect it to teaching “about life.” So, although self-reflection was highly valued by teachers in this study, and was connected to self understanding and life understanding, most teachers did not make direct connections to wisdom, and one teacher who valued self-reflection was very resistant to such ideas.

**Metacognition.** Metacognition is a psychological process that is related to self-reflection. It is an expected outcome of English language arts education according to the Ontario curriculum, and has been related to wisdom development by Sternberg (2001b) and the Berlin group (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Experienced teachers Sophie and Frances named metacognition as a thinking skill that they want their students to learn.
Francis said that she is “glad it’s in our curriculum, because it’s giving students an opportunity explicitly to be more reflective. And I think that’s an important part of our society that we’re kind of missing right now.” Frances sees English class as a unique opportunity for students to explore reflective life learning, seemingly pointing to the link between metacognition and wisdom that has been suggested by psychologists.

**Critical literacy.** In the introductory sections, I examined a few places where critical literacy could intersect with teaching for life/wisdom, and this was also mentioned above as a part of self-text/experience-text connections. Half of the teachers in this study discussed employing critical literacy and/or teaching practices that are aligned with anti-oppression principles (5E: Tina, Joshua, Frances, Allen, Kevin; 3B: Holly, Jen, Thomas). I will discuss a few of their comments in depth, to highlight specific insights into the relationship between teaching about life/wisdom and critical literacy.

Thomas (B) noted that he finds critical literacy important for senior secondary students: the Russell essay “goes into an area which I really like exploring with that age group, which is the idea of, you know, um, the privileged perspective”—the notion that literature is written (and read) through particular lenses including race, class, and gender. He continued:

When you get into the idea of power, like you see in *Macbeth*, and um, the - the stuff I was talking about with Bertrand Russell, in terms of privilege, I mean, those are also, sort of, life connections that, on a more, I guess political level, right, where people can get into conversations, like … who has the power and the privilege in today’s society and why?
Importantly, Thomas relates critical literacy to life connections. He finds critical literacy to be a valuable approach for his senior English students to gain perspectives on ‘real life’ through literature.

Tina (E) also discussed critical literacy, but she did not omit gender from her analysis. She said that, if she were to teach the provided texts:

I would also flip it around and ask would these texts - like do sort of an oppositional reading from, of them, and critique them, and ask critical questions, are we as a society wise when we only study one group and one sex.

Tina suggested that through considering “the other perspectives that were omitted” from a particular text, students can learn more about life beyond the classroom.

Critical literacy is a part of the Ontario curriculum, but only half of the teachers in this study referred to it, so it may not be pivotal in the ‘curriculum in use.’ Or, it is possible that some teachers did not find this topic relevant to the topic of teaching for wisdom, so did not bring it up. One teacher brought up a troubling example of the curriculum in use: reserving critical literacy for privileged students. Joshua (E) expressed a desire to use critical literacy in his classes of advantaged and highly ‘able’ students, so that they will be exposed to a world beyond their own experience: “our focus is on the voices that we don’t usually hear in our school system, because it is important to us to, again, for the kids to be aware of lives way beyond their circle of, uh, knowledge.” But Joshua believes that this critical literacy strategy is incompatible with the needs of his poorer, ‘lower-achieving’ students: “I tried to have conversations that were more political, ideological, etc., and they struggled even with that so incredibly….” Joshua suggested that these students did not have sufficient abstract thinking skills to participate
in these conversations. He believes that poorer students need basic skills to cope in the working world: “they needed me to help them to be successful in the small ways in life, above all else … These are the kind of kids who lose jobs all the time because they don’t know how to communicate with the people.” Joshua draws a line between what advantaged and disadvantaged students need to know. He wants to help both “in life,” but the way that he approaches this seems to reinforce the relative social locations of advantaged and disadvantaged students: wealthy students are at leisure to think about and question the world, while poorer students need to learn to fit into their place in it. Joshua’s ‘adult needs’ model supersedes the possibility of critical literacy/cultural analysis education for disadvantaged students.

Holly (B) described an experience in her preservice training that demonstrates the fact that anti-oppression principles and critical literacy are not present in all English classrooms. When an opportunity arose to use a text to teach about power and its relationship to sexual violence, “[the supervising teacher] was like, ‘we’re not even going to touch it [those topics].’” The supervising teacher predicted backlash from parents if she addressed the text in a socially-engaged manner. Holly described the interaction:

And it’s just so traumatizing ’cause I feel like as a teacher it’s my responsibility to at least … to chip away [at those attitudes] … [The supervising teacher] just told me that I was young and naïve and that after five or six years of teaching I would come around and realize that I’m not going to have any impact on these kids. I think that [the supervising teacher] just skipped a whole bunch of stuff that could have been, really effective in helping them learn more about themselves.
Holly sees deep value in taking on difficult topics in the classroom, but her supervising teacher was staunchly opposed. Holly also saw pervasive problems with homophobia in the school, and felt that teachers had failed to meet their responsibility to address it: “I just couldn’t handle the ignorance that was coming from them [the students] and it’s because none of the teachers want to deal with it.” She felt a deep rift between her teacher training and her teaching experience: “All we were taught last year [in B.Ed training] was inclusion, inclusion, inclusion, right?” Holly comments reflect a belief that teaching about life and having an impact as a teacher means that teachers must enact anti-oppression principles in their teaching: such a strategy provides opportunities for students to “learn more about themselves.” She overtly connects a critical literacy model with life learning.

6.2.f Summary. Teachers’ beliefs about the connections between texts and life took many different forms, suggesting that is not through any one avenue that life/wisdom learning relates to literature; rather, there are multiple connections to be made. Teachers expressed that they value the presence of students’ lived experience in the classroom, both for subject learning, and for the possibility of life and wisdom learning. Looking back to the theories that informed this study, it is clear that personal growth models and wisdom-related cognitive skills were frequently applicable to teachers’ remarks. I will comment further in the General Discussion of results.

6.3 Connecting Teaching to Life

I will now expand the focus of the discussion beyond the teaching of literature, to include English teachers’ broader teaching goals and strategies. Of course, much of English class revolves around texts, so there is some overlap between these categories.
Table 3, below, describes the themes that make up the superordinate theme ‘Connecting teaching to life.’

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-order themes</th>
<th>Second-order themes</th>
<th>Third-order themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>English class is already about life/wisdom</td>
<td><strong>Student-led discussion</strong></td>
<td>Guiding students to their own life knowledge Teacher confidence Reservations Unique relational position of English teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Student-teacher relationship</strong></td>
<td>Classroom management Patience and understanding Systemic patterns of meaning and behaviour Negotiating teacher authority Relating as a young teacher</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Understanding students’ development and needs</strong></td>
<td>Adolescent life stage Developmental appropriateness Students’ individual differences Culturally-situated learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>The personal in teaching</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Teachers as wise</strong></td>
<td>Teachers nominated as wisdom exemplars Teaching = being wise</td>
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6.3.a English class is already about teaching for life. Some teachers spoke explicitly about the unique opportunity for life/wisdom learning in English language arts classes. Emily, a beginner, spoke in the hypothetical:

Major class discussions, and students actually working within themselves to think about their own lives and reflecting on what wisdom they have, or they think they have, [that] would be really important. And yeah, I think that English would probably be the best subject to work through that in.

Emily believes that English language arts education could be “the best” site of wisdom learning in schools, but her comments are prescriptive, not descriptive: she is making a recommendation, rather than describing the way she sees the subject being taught.

Jen, another beginner, already sees wisdom-related learning happening in schools, especially in English class:

I think that English is one of the courses that really allows us to do that … to connect it to students’ own life experiences. … I think in the classroom we have the opportunity to, you know, if you’re talking about these kinds of issues relating to um, you know, um, having students think about the world around them and their own location within that and how things that they do affect people you know all over the world, um, provides the opportunity for them, to gain wisdom.

Jen’s take on English teaching is influenced by her commitment to social justice: she sees wisdom in students coming to an understanding of power and social location, in line with a critical literacy instructional model.

Bob, also a beginner, is committed to teaching about life, stating early in the interview that teaching is “not only doing the English stuff in the curriculum but teaching
these kids that there’s things outside of life that they bring into the class and that that’s important to address inside the classroom as well.” Experienced teacher Greta took the same stance as Bob, and extended it further, finding “a tremendous correlation between wisdom and teaching.” Bob and Greta both see students’ lived experiences and life learning as part of English language arts education, and Greta explicitly connects this to wisdom.

Frances, another experienced teacher, said that life and wisdom are deeply engrained in her practice as an English teacher, and she sees this as an expanding part of the field:

I think all my lessons, that’s what they do [teach about life], that’s where I’m coming from, that’s what’s my initial idea … Throughout my lessons I’m asking them [students] to make connections to their own life and through [bringing in examples from] popular culture, I find that’s a great way to get kids to make those connections to themselves. … I think going at bigger ideas like, what is wisdom? What is truth? What is love? All of these things, these bigger inquiry questions - what are you living for? That’s an essential part of what we teach and so I’m so glad that that’s a framework in which many of us are working now, these big ideas and essential questions.

Frances is pleased about the general turn she sees toward the “bigger” and “essential” questions that lead to wisdom. For her, these are already a fundamental part of English teaching. These general comments about teaching goals reveal that teaching connects to life in many ways. Importantly, they point to a link between students’ life knowledge and teaching about life in the classroom. These overt connections seem to draw on personal
growth models of teaching, but extend beyond to explicitly support teaching for wisdom. They also recall the connections between wisdom and schooling in much earlier eras (Marrou, 1964).

6.3.b **Student-led discussion.** If students’ life experiences are key to teaching for life and wisdom, then we should consider how these topics enter the classroom discourse. Teachers named student-led discussion as a way for students to contribute their life knowledge. Importantly, student-led discussion emerged as a focus for the majority of teachers in this study. This area centred around beliefs about ‘guiding students to their own life knowledge,’ ‘teacher confidence,’ ‘reservations,’ and the ‘unique relational position of English teachers.’

Most of the teachers in this study talked about creating space for student-led discussion, and emphasized that such interaction is personally important to teachers. As Thomas (B) put it:

I’d much rather hear what the students in the class have to say, and get them to, sort of, talk to each other, and be the facilitator more than the teacher … If I hear myself talking a lot in a classroom, I feel like I’m not really doing the right thing. Like the majority of participants, Thomas wants a classroom where students feel free to speak openly with the group. Why, specifically, do teachers value student-led discussion, and how do they work to support it?

**Guiding students to their own life knowledge.** Some teachers’ comments illustrate that taking a student-centred approach to learning is key to teaching about life/wisdom. They suggest that life lessons are learned most effectively when students take an active role in seeking critical insight into their own actions. Teachers are uniquely
positioned to support and “guide” (Jen [B]) students to take on “strengths and weaknesses” (Carl [B]). Renee (E) happily described her English class as a place for students to “find their voice:” “I have found myself enjoying the role of facilitator and helping students to, uh, you know, to be what they want to be.” This focus on students’ personal development is grounded in valuing students’ own experiences: the teacher is the facilitator of life learning, not the main source of life knowledge. Psychological perspectives on teaching for wisdom have suggested the importance of a ‘wisdom mentor’ (e.g. Staudinger & Baltes, 1996; Ardelt, 2010), and the guiding role that these teachers describe seems in line with this view.

**Teacher confidence.** The space created for student-led discussion could be influenced by teachers’ confidence in their ability to guide discussion. Allen (E) discussed how his approach to student-led discussion changed over time:

> At the beginning, you know, I felt I had to script every part of [the lesson]. … If they got off script I would pull them back, I wouldn’t follow where they were taking me, I’d get them back to where I wanted them to go. I remember fairly early on in my teaching where somebody said, “Sir, what do you want us to say?” and I realized, that’s probably not the right fit. … I’m not frightened anymore, I’m not terrified, which you are as a young teacher, that you’re not going to get back to where you have to be, I know it’s going to get back now, so I just enjoy the trip.

As Allen’s career has progressed, he has become much more comfortable with student-led discussion, so it has become a more prominent (and enjoyable) part of his teaching. He sees that students’ contributions direct the class in pedagogically-important ways that
are in line with his teaching goals. A few beginner teachers (Deanna, Jen, and Ariel) raised concerns about some perceived impediments to student-led discussion: the maturity and investment of the students, and the demands of the curriculum. Together, their statements suggest that these beginner teachers are sensitive to factors affecting their teaching that they consider to be outside of their control, which in turn restricts their sense of agency in the classroom. Though these statements may not be representative of all teachers, it seems possible that career stage influences teachers’ views of student-led discussion. Zancanella (1991) noted that beginner teachers had more difficulty teaching according to their own preferred models than experienced teachers, when faced with competing curricular demands and adversarial institutional cultures. The present comments also suggest that this may be a challenge for beginner teachers.

**Reservations.** While the majority of teachers praised the value of student-led discussion, some (Ariel [B], Jen [B], Deanna [B], and Kevin [E]) paired this praise with reservations. For example, Kevin said that meaningful learning requires that teachers move beyond the role of “the person at the front [of the room] talking.” But, his praise was not universal: “I see too many teachers running what I think of as a ‘talk show.’ Everybody talks, but where is the skill development?” It seems that Kevin values a balance between student-led vs. teacher-led learning. Ariel and Deanna noted that there are some limits to their encouragement of student-led discussion: though they value student-led discussion, they see choosing class topics as the teacher’s job. Jen noted that some groups of students need more structure for “mature” discussion to be possible. These more directive views of teaching could seem to run counter to a personal growth model, but even committed advocates of student-centred teaching argue that such
approaches must be appropriately facilitated by a teacher in order to be effective (Fisher, 2008).

**Unique relational position of English teachers.** Several experienced teachers (Kevin, Frances, and Sophie) noted that English teachers are uniquely positioned to hear about students’ more sensitive life concerns. Kevin suggested that “maybe because of the nature of the subject matter, and, uh - they think you’re a caring person, more so than a math teacher.” Frances has found it “tough” at times to encounter students’ serious life situations, “like abuse and suicidal thoughts,” but Frances finds it “humbling, the things that they [students] will reveal to an English teacher, or at least to me.” As experienced teachers, these participants make such comments in light of many years of student disclosures. Such remarks suggest a special role for English teachers as wisdom mentors, in the manner described by Ardelt (2010) and the Berlin group (Staudinger & Baltes, 1996).

Most English teachers want to include student-led discussion, even if some have reservations about it. Student-centred class discussion that joins teachers, students, and texts is strongly connected with a personal growth model of teaching (Siskin, 1994). Given that this kind of discussion has been described as important to teaching for life/wisdom, I will now consider the question of how teachers support and encourage it. In other words, how do teachers establish the kind of classroom environment that supports life/wisdom learning?

**6.3.c Student-teacher relationship.** Teachers discussed how some of the relational aspects of the classroom, including beliefs about the nature of classroom
management, student behaviour, and teacher authority, are crucial for ‘setting the stage’ for life and wisdom learning.

**Classroom management.** As beginner teacher Jen noted, teachers must work “to establish the kind of environment where people can share their ideas,” and students’ sense of comfort and (emotional) safety is a part of this. She acknowledges that a safe space must be established for discussion to happen freely. This includes building a mutually-respectful teacher-learner relationship, but also a level of comfort between her and her students. Thomas (B) also described the importance of building a healthy classroom environment: he sees the opportunity to use the classroom as a microcosm of the world beyond it: “if we can figure out how to get along in the classroom, then we can kind of figure out how to get along in the world.”

The nature of the teacher-student relationship is a key part of creating safe space. Teachers’ views of classroom management seem to be influential in this process. When discussing difficult or disruptive situations, most of the participants made comments that revealed awareness of the ‘ripple effect’ that teachers’ actions can have in these situations, with wider consequences for classroom relationships. In order to establish and maintain a healthy classroom environment, difficult situations must be handled with care. Building relationships and building a community are key parts of these classroom management strategies. This suggests a more holistic view of the classroom than psychological perspectives have explored: where Sternberg (2001b) details activities that teachers should use to teach about life/wisdom, these teachers’ comments describe the groundwork that must be in place to sustain such activities.
Patience and understanding. Emily (B), Deanna (B), Bob (B), and Joshua (E) advocated especially strongly for patience and calm when dealing with difficult situations in the classroom. Emily said that by “leaving some time for the student to have time to cool off, like, they’re not going anywhere, they’re going to come back.” If she responds in anger, she is “basically pushing [the student] out the door,” and losing the chance to build and maintain a connection with the student. So, she is not simply trying to avoid conflict in the moment; she is working towards the longer-term goal of a healthy teacher-learner relationship.

Holly (B), Jen (B), and Renee (E) emphasized the importance of listening to students to diffuse conflict and build healthy working relationships. After a long career using this approach, Renee no longer finds classroom disruptions stressful, and feels confident that “there's always a way to diffuse any anxiety or conflict … [by] avoiding confrontation and listening to people and hearing what they're really saying about what's bothering them.” Renee feels that her approach of patience and understanding has paid off in the form of a more comfortable classroom.

Systemic patterns of meaning and behaviour. While this study seeks to explore some of the positive possibilities in English language arts education, there are many factors that complicate the endeavour of teaching about life and wisdom in the classroom.

Some teachers pointed to wider systems and patterns of meaning and behaviour that surround (and even control) both teachers’ and students’ actions, and noted how this affects students’ ability to engage in subject learning and life learning. Teachers’ actions form part of the wider school system, and students (particularly those who have been labelled as ‘difficult’ or ‘low-ability’) are sensitive to the way the system perceives them.
Thomas (B) discussed the school as a “community,” where he must work to “build a reputation” as an invested community member in order to work effectively with students. Joshua (E) reasoned early on his teaching that “volatile” students’ actions “weren’t really aimed at me. It was aimed at a - at a world that they identified as being against them. And that as soon as they saw me as a possible ally … I just didn’t have difficult situations [anymore].” These teachers are aware that students’ and teachers’ actions are embedded in systems that are larger than the individuals involved. As Sophie remarked, “teaching as a punitive activity has not gone away, I’m sad to say.”

This systemic view seems important if all students are to benefit from teaching for life/wisdom, not only those who are already model students. When Allen (E) bought up disengaged students, he advocated for taking a broader view of their situations: “Who knows what they, the distress that they’ve come to a class [with], what teachers have humiliated them in the past, the distress they have of the adult world?” After 23 years working in education, Frances (E) also took a systemic view:

When you talk about problems in schools, yeah, I’ve been there. And I’ve seen the systemic issues that go on around privilege and around people not being - not really recognizing what they’re doing, and the effect it has, and not questioning what they do, especially from a position of privilege.

Frances has faced backlash in her school community for working from an explicitly anti-racist standpoint, and found that challenging discriminatory practices in her school was not always welcomed. Kevin (E), too, spoke out about the racism and marginalization that he continues to see in schools. Both Frances and Kevin talked about how they make specific efforts to avoid perpetuating these cycles in their work as teachers. Holly, a
beginner, talked about her own concerns: “I like to walk my own course and sometimes that’s not always great in an institutionalized education system.” Teachers are bound to institutional practices that may limit more creative, non-traditional, or radical teaching approaches, and this can have both positive and negative consequences.

The view of teaching expressed by these teachers recalls my earlier argument for the necessity of critical literacy as a part of teaching for wisdom. The presence of systemic discriminatory practices in schools means that teaching for a good life must include teacher and student engagement with emancipatory learning.

**Negotiating teacher authority.** Authority is an influential factor in the teacher-student relationship. Nearly every beginner teacher (all but Carl), and two experienced teachers (Sophie and Frances) made comments that indicate the need to negotiate one’s authority in relation to students. These comments often centred on teachers’ desire to reduce power differentials in the classroom. Ariel (B) said that her classroom “is a relationship. It’s not a, um, dictatorship,” and Sophie (E) called this “trust relationship” a “careful dance.” Frances (E) noted that “the teaching-learning relationship, it has to be one of compassion.” Holly and Thomas also sought mutual respect and fairness, while Bob (all B) placed high value on the relationships he builds with students. Attending to the balance of power between teachers and students is important to ensure that there is trust, respect, and goodwill in the classroom. Creating space to challenge status quo assumptions in the classroom, including those about authority, also forms part of a politicized critical literacy education (Luke & Woods, 2009).
Relating as a young teacher. The ‘authority—accommodation’ dimension discussed above was especially salient for the younger group of teachers, and Jen’s (B) comments could help to illustrate why. She explained:

As a teacher I think that I really command authority in the classroom in the sense that I like to be respected, but I really think that the best way to achieve that kind of relationship with students is to develop a rapport with them, and creating an understanding in the classroom environment that it’s a respectful place and we’re here to work collectively as a team towards our learning and reaching our goals.

Here, Jen sways between the language of authority and the language of a compassionate relationship. It appears that she is still working towards establishing her approach to the teacher-student relationship. This can be a source of anxiety and tension: she went on to describe young teachers’ tendency to be “fearful” of losing control of the classroom, and the need to remember that students are “people” too. She spoke in general terms, seemingly wanting to convey that these are trends she sees, rather than presenting these fears as her own.

Emily (B) believed that “as a younger teacher, [students] think they can get away with more.” She saw this as both a challenge and a strength: students relate more easily to someone “on the younger side of the scale.” Bob also saw his youth as a relational strength, giving him an edge in classes that look up to him as a ‘rare’ young, male role model.

It seems that Jen and Emily’s concerns are specific to their career stage. And if we look back to Allen’s (E) comments about needing to keep to his teacher-led ‘script’ as a young teacher, it also seems possible that their fears and reservations may fade with time
as they gain more experience. As Zancanella (1991) noted, conflicts around teaching goals and models may be more difficult for younger teachers to navigate, reflecting their particular stage of career development.

6.3.d Understanding students’ development and needs. Teachers’ beliefs and strategies appear to be influenced by their understanding of students’ developmental and individual readiness to learn about life and wisdom, as I will describe.

Adolescent life stage. The majority of teachers from both the beginner and experienced cohorts discussed their knowledge about dilemmas and situations specific to the adolescent life stage. They connected this knowledge to how they approach teaching English in general, and, as might seem intuitive, they also use this knowledge of students’ life stage to bring life and wisdom into the classroom.

Greta, an experienced teacher, described how integral this knowledge can be for English teaching:

We rewrote our grade nine English course when I was in the school, and we tried to look at the kinds of things that really are important to grade nine students. And that is - when they’re coming into a school, it is to find a place for themselves, to make a place for themselves in the school, um, because they’re the ‘newbies.’ They’ve come from being the big guys in the elementary school to being the babies in the high school. Um, they have new classmates, they have new teachers, they may be taking new subjects, uh, it’s a whole new thing for them. So we had them - we began with the unit that we called ‘This Is Me,’ where we took a look at identity, and we read different things that would relate to students that were
trying to identify themselves or to create a space for themselves within this new framework.

Although Greta is talking about younger students, this kind of thinking also extends to students in higher grades, as the next comments will illustrate.

Deanna, a beginner teacher, saw reflective writing as an important part of English class. Like all of the teachers (except for Bob [B]) she suggested a reflective writing exercise as a part of teaching the Bertrand Russell essay, asking students to consider what they live for. Her comments give particular insights into how she connects this both to her students’ life stage and to the kinds of life learning that are important at that life stage (note that Emily [B], Thomas [B], and Renee [E] each made these same connections):

I mean they are at that cusp of moving from one stage in their life to the next so perhaps [they could write about] three things that have defined them so far and they know will be useful for this next stage in their life … at this point the students should be on the exit stage of their teenage angst and whatever, so they should have more of a clear definite vision of who they are as people, and I think this kind of reflective writing will help that.

Deanna noted that senior students are about to move on to a new phase in life, so it is a good time to consider how their strengths could help them to succeed in young adulthood. She sees reflective writing as a useful tool for this process of establishing a “vision of who they are as people.” But her dismissal of adolescents’ life concerns as “teenage angst” begs consideration. Perhaps she is used to working with privileged youth, whose problems she rejects as trivial. Or perhaps she is still gaining the experience that would allow her to put “teenage angst” into context. Bob (B), by contrast, is aware of the
significant challenges that some of his students face, and connects this to their level of engagement in the classroom:

You can’t really get into the learning if they need emotional support or if they need to talk about, um, if they need to talk about being suspended or if they need to talk about their probation officer coming the next day, um, you can’t really get to the learning.

Like Bob (B), Sophie, Allen, and Tina (all E) also gave real credence to the life challenges, often serious, that affect student engagement.

Another beginner, Ariel, expressed concern about the pressure that her students face to make life decisions at a young age: “to determine, what are you doing? What are you doing? What do you want to be? Who do you want to be?” Ariel is sensitive to the coercive voices that her students are expected to answer to.

Jen, also a beginner, placed her students’ (mis)behaviour into a broader developmental context:

I think, more often than not, something that they’re communicating, um, has validity, it’s not just like a random outburst, it’s coming from something. … You also have to give them the benefit of the doubt, that it’s a very young person, and [they] are probably just trying to communicate some feelings that they don’t yet have the skills to communicate.

Jen believes that student disruptions have valid root causes, and tries to be generous with her students, influenced by her belief that they are still developing their communication skills. As Thomas (B) said, “it’s hard being a student.”
Renee, an experienced teacher, believed that bringing life experience and life learning into her classroom had helped to head off problems with student engagement, keeping students “alive and engaged and communicating with each other and with me.” If teachers do not work to incorporate these life connections, she sees the result: “detached, disengaged, sleeping students in classrooms.” Emily (B) said:

I think I try to make it, every lesson connect to a student’s life in some way …if you go into a class and you don’t understand what your learning connects to [in] your actual life, you check out. It’s not ‘I don’t care about this—[it’s] this has nothing to do with me. Whatever.’ Right? And you push it away. So as a teacher I think that, it’s, I try to make it relatable to the students and relate to them myself, yeah.

Emily, too, argued that student engagement is the responsibility of the teacher, and is deeply connected with life learning. Finding ways to connect learning to adolescents’ “actual life” is part of tailoring teaching to students’ life stage.

In his balanced curriculum for wisdom, Sternberg (2001b) agreed that there are life challenges specific to the adolescent life stage, and advocated for wisdom learning in pre-teen years so that students can meet these challenges as they arise. And Bluck and Glück (2004) found that adolescents, like adults, related wisdom to their life dilemmas. The teachers’ comments above suggest that they see the specificities of their students’ life stage as appropriate gateways to teaching about life/wisdom.

*Developmental appropriateness.* Although teachers use life stage considerations to tailor teaching to students’ lives and interests, three experienced teachers (Tina, Allen, and Kevin) raised questions about the developmental appropriateness of teaching for
wisdom. Tina thought the potential to teach for wisdom “depends on the other end, who’s receiving it?” Students may not be ready because of the “age that they’re at.” Allen also thought that his adolescent students are generally too young to benefit from teaching for wisdom, but he saw a greater potential for wisdom in young students who had been through significant life changes (e.g. students who had arrived in Canada as refugees). Kevin noted that “maybe grade 12s could function in this realm of ideas, but by and large not, because they haven’t thought about things in this way, as [with] that much perspective on life.” Such comments run counter to the opinions of psychological researchers, who have suggested that adolescents are developmentally-ready to benefit from wisdom learning (e.g. Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005). If, as Richardson and Pasupathi (2005) suggested, there is a ‘lag’ between wisdom learning and the manifestation of wise behaviour, then it may be hard for teachers to see wisdom in their students. Perhaps, as Ardelt (2010) and others have suggested, young people need the assistance of supportive mentors to move from ‘wisdom readiness’ to ‘wise behaviour.’

**Students’ individual differences.** All participants discussed tailoring their teaching to meet students’ individual learning needs. Many of these comments related to differentiated instruction in general, but in some cases, comments shed light on issues related to teaching for life/wisdom.

Kevin (E) saw students’ interests as a way to differentiate instruction. Renee (E) also reported taking students’ interests into account, as well as their skills:

I’m not gonna teach a lesson the same way twice, because the students are different people and I just don’t get that [approach]. That, I had a lifelong conflict
with some of the teachers I worked with who want to put things on paper and put them in page protectors and put them in binders.

Renee’s comment about her “lifelong conflict” reveals that she feels very strongly that lessons should be revised for each group of students: putting a set plan in a binder is not the way to teach well, in her opinion. Using students’ interests to guide teaching, as Renee and Kevin suggest, also seems like a good way to encourage self-text and experience-text connections.

Jen (B) noted that students differ on their desired level of personal engagement in English class: “[some] students are more comfortable writing out things that are really heartfelt and sincerely like meaningful to them, and then others might just be more comfortable writing about some hobbies.” This could affect the kinds of self-text or experience-text connections that students feel comfortable making.

Generally, these teachers’ views of students’ individual differences reflected a desire to adjust learning to individual needs in a way that connects to students’ interests and comfort level. It is worth noting that differentiated instruction, universally-supported by these teachers, is a hallmark of personal growth models (e.g. Goodwyn & Findlay, 1999). The Ontario curriculum for English also directs teachers to adjust teaching to individual learners’ needs, so this is part of expected practice (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Culturally-situated learning. Beyond individual differences, there are also cultural differences in the kinds of knowledge that students bring to the classroom. Allen (E) said that “when most of your students are Hindu or Islam[ic; i.e. Muslim] or secular” in background, they may be unfamiliar with the Judeo-Christian allusions that are present in
much of the Western canon. To him, this makes some texts less suitable for use with his students. At Allen’s urban secondary school, few students speak English at home, so he is also attentive to the problem of assuming that students arrive with an extensive English vocabulary. For this reason, he suggested that *Bushed* “is probably not the best choice” for his classroom. It is important that Allen takes his students’ needs into account, although one could also interpret his comments as reflecting a belief that classic texts are simply beyond the reach of his diverse group of students. His comments recall those found in Skerrett (2007), who described the existence of a ‘first-class,’ Western canon based English education for adept, advantaged learners, and a more multicultural, personally-situated ‘second-class’ learning for students outside “the mainstream” (p. 354). Goodwyn & Findlay (2002) also described that a personal growth approach was more likely to be used with students who were younger and working in lower ability streams. Assumptions about students’ pre-existing knowledge form part of the way that teachers “mediate” school learning (Cornbleth, 1984; this also relates to the ‘hidden curriculum’ and ‘curriculum in use’). In diverse schools, it is important to acknowledge that students may arrive with different prior (e.g., cultural) knowledge. But there are also risks inherent in trying to shape schooling to students’ perceived needs, such as the possibility of an implicit two-tier system.

**6.3.e The personal in teaching.** The relational aspects of teaching seem very important to the teachers in this study. And teaching about life is not only about students’ lived experience. Teaching about life can also mean that teachers’ own lives are part of the classroom.
Bringing personal values and experiences. The majority of the teachers in this study, from both beginner and experienced cohorts, discussed how their own values and experiences are brought out in the classroom environment. Sometimes this was an explicit part of the discussion, or sometimes an implicit acknowledgement of the influence of their own ‘ways of being.’ Some teachers discussed this as a part of the endeavour of teaching for life/wisdom.

As Kevin (E) said, even if teachers don’t intentionally teach about values, “somehow or other or I am going to show them what my values are, you know, even if I’m not trying.” Being a whole person in the classroom, who arrives with an acknowledged set of values and preferences, rather than “having a mask all the time,” (as Ariel [B] said) could be a way to establish a person-to-person connection with students that supports life and wisdom learning.

Frances (E), Sophie (E), and Ariel (B) all reported that they refer to their own life experiences explicitly in their teaching. As Sophie remarked, “I punctuate what I teach with my own life all the time.”

Thomas, Ariel, and Holly (all B) commented that their personal values such as honesty and open-mindedness are overt elements of their preferred classroom dynamics. Experienced teachers added important retrospective observations to this topic. Joshua (E) recalled that when he tried to adopt the practices of an admired colleague, he “couldn’t do it.” He felt that he had to be true to his own strengths and beliefs in the classroom to be an effective teacher. Renee (E) also made a strong connection between her personality, her preferences, and her teaching, saying that teaching has “never been like work” for her. She has experienced no disconnect between her personal way of being, and her way
of being as a teacher. It seems natural to expect that teachers’ personal beliefs (including their beliefs about life learning and wisdom) would influence their teaching practices, and research on implicit theories (or models) of teaching has reinforced such connections (Clark & Peterson, 1986).

**Modelling/setting an example.** Carl, Jen, and Holly (B), and Joshua and Kevin (E) noted that they consciously model actions and behaviours for students. Carl noted that teacher modelling is particularly impactful because of how much time teachers and students spend together. Holly, a beginner, connected this to teaching about life: “as long as I’m always, constantly being self-reflective and growing as a person, then I can teach my students to do that.” Kevin relayed a strong belief in the importance of modelling behaviours for students, but did not think that this would extend to wisdom: he sees himself as “a fallible human being” and doesn’t see wisdom as necessary for teaching.

These teachers seem to be aware that they bring their own values to teaching, and they make connections between their personal values and experiences and the way that they teach about life and wisdom. Some consciously see themselves as models for their students, setting examples for life learning in the classroom. Sternberg (2001b) suggested that teaching for wisdom involves modelling balanced, reflective thinking for students. The Berlin group also argued that wisdom could be developed in part by exposure to the examples of mentors or wisdom figures (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). The conscious modelling of the five teachers above suggests a parallel with these psychological views.

**6.3.f Teachers as wise.** Unlike Kevin above, some teachers do connect teaching to being wise, though they may be hesitant to call themselves wise.
**Teachers nominated as wise exemplars.** When asked to nominate a wise person in their lives, four participants nominated other teachers. Greta (E) and Joshua (E) nominated English teachers, while Renee (E) and Ariel (B) nominated teachers of other subjects. All said that the wise exemplar teachers had been influential on their own teaching practices, and Renee and Ariel each connected this influence to their own commitments to student-centred teaching. Wisdom and teaching are linked, at least for some teachers. This finding is reflective of Jason and colleagues’ (2001) and Khan’s (2009) reports that teachers are likely to be nominated as wise. Wise teachers are also reported to have held mentorship roles for the teachers in the present study, presenting another connection between wisdom and mentoring.

**Teaching = being wise.** An even stronger link between teaching and wisdom was made by teachers who considered their own teacher behaviours to be instances of wisdom. Bob (B) said that his friends approach him for help because they think he is wise, and jokingly calls this a “teacher syndrome.” As he sees it, his willingness to help others in their times of need “no matter what” is part of his teacher identity. When asked about experiences of wisdom, Emily (B) reported that she is wise when interacting when students:

I think that even in my classes, as a teacher, I tend to have - the discussion will tend to end up in this open ended sort of philosophical question that I think the students enjoy, sometimes you know they seem to be react positively to that.

Though Emily is hesitant to state her case too strongly, she senses her own wisdom when she has life discussions with students, and when those discussions are engaging to students. Renee (E) also viewed such activities as wise. Their examples recall the
Socratic methods argued for by Sternberg (2001b) and Lipman (2003). Joshua (E) saw wisdom in the way he supports and encourages other teachers, but when speaking of a particularly important moment of interaction with a student, he called it a “completely lucky break! … Was it wisdom, was it some sort of ingrained, inherent wisdom that I don’t realize I have? I don’t think so.” He is resistant to seeing his interactions with students as instances of wisdom.

Some teachers do expressly connect teaching with wisdom, and experienced teachers were especially likely to nominate other teachers as wisdom exemplars, a point which I will return to in the General Discussion.

6.3.6 Summary. The themes of ‘Connecting teaching to life’ relate teachers’ beliefs about their general classroom practices, and the intersections that these practices make with teaching for life/wisdom. Links to personal growth and cultural analysis/critical literacy models were notable among these themes, as well as numerous representations of the mentorship position of English teachers. Teachers’ remarks suggest there are a variety of (often-interrelated) pathways connecting teaching and wisdom. I will return to these ideas in the General Discussion below.

7. General Discussion

Through the reporting and discussion of results in the previous section, I have touched on many of the intersections between English language arts teaching and teaching for life and wisdom. This general discussion follows up on some key ideas that accompanied the reporting of results. In the ‘Results and Discussion’ section, I explored many case-level nuances in how teachers related to and expressed particular themes, and also directed attention to the frequency of support for each area, directing attention to
where ‘beginner-experienced’ differences appeared informative. Building on this, I now turn my attention to some of the patterns that appeared in the results, including attention to themes that reflect views held universally by the sample of teachers.

7.1 Similarities and Differences between Beginner and Experienced Teachers

I examined beginner and experienced teachers’ support of each of the themes described in this study, to see whether views differed between cohorts. Results were first organized under the top-level (superordinate) themes of ‘Connecting texts to life’ and ‘Connecting teaching to life.’ At this broadest level, few differences existed between beginner and experienced teachers’ support for these motives in teaching. I also examined response patterns at the level of individual constituent themes, looking for instances of similarity and difference between cohorts. At the level of first-order themes, there were no notable differences in the salience of themes between cohorts, but at the second-order and third-order levels, some patterns emerged (see Tables 2 and 3 under ‘Results and Discussion’ for organization of themes). I will focus discussion on the areas that revealed particularly strong harmony between all teachers, and areas that could suggest characteristic differences between beginner and experienced teachers’ beliefs.

7.1.a Universally-supported themes. Four themes enjoyed universal (or near-universal) support from teachers in this study: using themes in the text to connect learning to life, encouraging students’ self-text/experience-text connections, teaching to promote the cognitive process of self-reflection (except for 1 beginner), and modifying teaching to meet students’ individual differences. These four themes appear to be fundamental to English teaching practices for the teachers in this study, for both beginner and experienced groups. The first three themes represent universal practices in
‘Connecting texts to life,’ while the fourth represents a universal aspect of ‘Connecting teaching to life.’ Table 4 lists these themes, which I will discuss below.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate theme</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting texts to life</td>
<td>Themes in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-text/experience-text connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-reflection(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting teaching to life</td>
<td>Students' individual differences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)One beginner teacher did not express this view.

Teachers looked to *themes in the text* to find literary content to relate to teaching for life/wisdom. As I discussed previously, this strategy is a part of the Ontario curriculum, as well as part of a personal growth teaching model (Cox, 1991; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). This supports the idea that teaching for personal growth is compatible with the Ontario curriculum. Teachers approached themes in diverse ways, suggesting that both curricular demands and a personal growth view are translated into individual teaching strategies. Zancanella (1991) suggested that pedagogical content knowledge is the mediating factor in individual teaching strategies, so Shulman’s (1987) construct is also relevant here.

I have discussed how *self-text and experience-text connections* were understood in different ways by different teachers: to organize units, to bridge students’ access to texts, for deeper student engagement, and as a guiding factor for selection of texts. Again, this theme provides support for personal growth models as discussed by Cox (1991) and Siskin (1994). Interest in selecting and organizing texts recalls Sternberg’s (2001b) suggestions for units of study centred around wisdom.
The use of literature to encourage students’ *self-reflection* was also found to be a near-universal practice. Reflection is a desired learning strategy in the Ontario English curriculum, so in this case, practice appears to reflect curriculum. Self-reflection is related to metacognition, which has been linked to wise thinking by Sternberg (2001b) and the Berlin group (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Thus, typical classroom practices seem to support the kind of learning that psychologists suggest could lead to wisdom.

The teaching strategy of attending to students’ *individual differences* was an aspect of ‘Connecting teaching to life’ that all teachers identified with. This approach is part of teachers’ duties as defined by the Ontario curriculum for English (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). In order to support students’ learning, including wisdom learning, teachers believe that they must modify teaching for individual students’ needs, an aspect of pedagogical content knowledge according to Scarlett (2009). Cox’s (1991) personal growth model, widely supported by teachers, is also focused on meeting the needs of individual learners. Other researchers such as Siskin (1994) connected differentiated instruction to supporting students’ personal growth and to building student-teacher relationships which support the open discussion necessary to bring wisdom learning into the classroom. Teachers appear motivated to meet students ‘where they are,’ which could be aligned with wise action as defined in psychological wisdom models: the Berlin group’s value relativism, and Sternberg’s balance of intrapersonal interests (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 2001b).

Despite some diversity in the way these themes were expressed (a topic to which I will return below), these four connections appear to represent standard, conventional teaching practices that bring life into the classroom. Their ubiquity likely relates in part to
their relationship to curriculum objectives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). And these themes are related to personal growth models of teaching, which have been strongly supported by teachers in research that spans cohorts and geographical locations (e.g. Dixon, 2009; Goodwyn & Findlay, 1999; Hardman & Williamson, 1993; Siskin, 1994; Zancanella, 1991). The present study appears to provide additional confirmation of the prevalence of personal growth models. A widely-represented relationship between teaching and wisdom may be suggested by the universality of teaching for individual differences and self-reflection, and harnessing self-text/experience-text connections.

7.1.b Cohort differences. Response patterns for some themes differed by cohort. I will comment on these differences in an attempt to define some of the characteristic features differentiating the beginner cohort from the experienced cohort. Table 5 (see next page) lists themes that were more reflective of views held by a particular cohort.

Beginner cohort. I will begin by exploring how beginner teachers connected texts to life. When a natural relationship between literature and wisdom came up, only beginner teachers expressed this through the idea that reading bears an intrinsic connection with wisdom. This generalized faith in reading’s good ends was also a part of experienced teachers’ comments, but as I will go on to discuss, experienced teachers had more specific comments about how reading relates to human wisdom. They supported life-text and experience-text connections, but were more likely than experienced teachers to promote using life or wisdom as a connecting theme among texts. This approach would place a focus on life/wisdom learning for students, but could potentially relegate such a focus to a single unit.
Table 5
Themes that differentiate beginner and experienced cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Beginner</th>
<th>Experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting texts to life</td>
<td>Literature is inherently about wisdom</td>
<td>Reading is a path to wisdom</td>
<td>Direct emotional connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Story makes us human</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relating to characters' actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content-driven approach</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process-driven approach</td>
<td>Connecting theme</td>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservations about connecting texts to life</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Teaching wisdom is inappropriate/impossible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive processes</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>Metacognition</td>
<td>Imaginative simulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting teaching to life</td>
<td>Student-led discussion</td>
<td>Teacher confidence</td>
<td>Unique relational position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-teacher relationship</td>
<td>Reservations about student-led discussion</td>
<td>Patience and understanding</td>
<td>Systemic patterns of meaning/behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiating teacher authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relating as a young teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding development and needs</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Developmental appropriateness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers as wise</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Teachers nominated as wise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was predominantly beginner teachers who spoke of encouraging critical thinking through texts. In this way, teaching for cognitive processes was perceived differently by the beginners. Viewed against the experienced teachers who spoke of metacognition and imaginative simulation, it seems possible that critical thinking could be a less-specific catch-all phrase for beginners. However, critical thinking does have a pedagogical definition in its own right, focused on reasoning abilities and reflection (Fisher, 2008;
Teaching critical reasoning through texts may be a particular focus for beginner teachers.

How did beginner teachers connect their teaching to life? It was predominantly beginner teachers who talked about external factors that complicate the use of student-led discussion to teach about life, and who expressed general reservations about such an approach. Interestingly, their concerns echoed those of some of the preservice teachers surveyed in Hardman and Williamson (1993), who were sharing concerns about a personal growth model of teaching. In the present study, one experienced teacher believed that it had become easier for him to support student-led discussion over time. As I mentioned earlier, it seems possible that younger teachers are less confident about the possibility of supporting successful student-led discussion, and therefore more attuned to possible complications. Certain aspects of the student-teacher relationship appeared more salient to beginner teachers than experienced teachers. Beginners seemed more focused on patience and understanding than experienced teachers and they were much more frequently concerned with negotiating the nature of their authority as a teacher. The fact that this latter theme was near-universal for the beginner teachers suggests that it is particularly important at that career stage. Beginner teachers seem very focused on a calm and communicative approach to classroom management, and in measuring the nature of their authority. Beginners also talked about the fact that their youth affected the nature of their student-teacher relationships. Such concerns seem entirely natural for new teachers who are not used to organizing a classroom and where being close to students’ age presents both relational challenges and opportunities. Young teachers are also less likely to have seniority in the workplace, which could affect their confidence in the classroom.
**Experienced cohort.** The way that experienced teachers connected texts to life sometimes differed from the views of beginners. Both groups found inherent connections between wisdom and literature, but for experienced teachers, this took the form of a direct emotional connection with literature, and the way that ‘story makes us human.’ Some theorists take narrative views of the self (e.g. Bruner, 1997; Ricoeur, 1992) that expressly link story to human self and identity. This idea has been connected to wisdom by researchers who suggest that it is through our narrative ‘life stories’ that wisdom is expressed (e.g. Ardelt, 2005; Ferrari, Weststrate, & Petro, 2013; Randall & Kenyon, 2001). In this way, these experienced teachers’ comments link closely to existing views of wisdom. In addition, an emotional connection to texts is seen by Oatley (1999) as part of learning about life through literature. These comments are supportive of psychological views of wisdom. Looking to content-driven approaches to teaching about life through texts, most of the teachers who spoke about directing attention to characters’ actions to learn about life were from the experienced group. This is a teacher-led approach to using literary content for life learning, perhaps indicating that years of experience grant these teachers greater familiarity with effective examples of literary characters’ life lessons. As for all participants, self-text/experience-text connections were considered important, but experienced teachers were more likely than beginners to be concerned with the student engagement aspect of self-text and experience-text connections. This seems like a more integrative approach to connecting texts to self than the beginners’ desire to group texts under a ‘life’ or ‘wisdom’ theme. But using texts to teach for wisdom was controversial for two experienced teachers, who considered it to be inappropriate or impossible. This concerned only two participants, but it is interesting that no beginners expressed such
concerns. Perhaps these experienced teachers simply felt more confident expressing their strong views. Or perhaps such views are more likely to be held by those who have had decades to form their opinions about teaching. Looking to teaching for cognitive skills, it was predominantly experienced teachers who spoke of imaginative simulation, and two experienced teachers discussed metacognition, but no beginners. Experienced teachers’ ability to connect teaching to these specific processes suggests that they are more likely to have a strong knowledge base about connecting thinking skills to reading and literary learning. Metacognition is valued by Sternberg (2001b) and the Berlin group (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) for its relationship to models of wisdom, and Oatley (1999) and Brockmeier (2009) connect imaginative experience to life learning, so this knowledge base seems deeply connected to wisdom learning.

Looking beyond texts to general teaching practices, student-led discussion was a point of interest for both cohorts, but while younger teachers’ lack of confidence was potentially an issue, experienced teachers were cognizant of the unique position occupied by English teachers. They believe that students connect with them more than with teachers of other subjects (Skerrett [2007] also reported this finding). Beginner teachers did not make this connection. This seems like a product of experience, and also suggests that experienced teachers may be better primed for student-led discussion than younger teachers. Experienced teachers also expressed greater attention to the systemic influences surrounding classroom dynamics. Awareness of these larger factors seems likely to be a product of greater exposure to administrative and school cultures over one’s career. Experienced teachers were the only ones to express concern about students’ developmental readiness for learning about life and wisdom. This could reflect
knowledge gained by working with students over many years, but, viewed differently, could indicate a lack of faith in young people’s capacities that is easier to hold when one’s own life stage is farther removed from students’ life stage. Psychological research has suggested that adolescence is a prime period for wisdom-related learning, which conflicts with these teachers’ views. While experienced teachers did not frequently see themselves as wise, several of them nominated other teachers as wise. This indicates a belief that teaching is connected to wisdom, but perhaps a social desirability bias resulted in more modest views of experienced teachers’ own work.

7.1.c Summary. In these depictions, I have sought to convey general, characteristic trends, but due to the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study, these can only be said to represent impressions, rather than widely representative depictions. But when compared with the beginners, experienced teachers’ views could reflect a broader and more sophisticated knowledge base about how to teach, as theories of teacher knowledge would predict (Shulman, 1987). Beginners’ views of teaching for wisdom sometimes seemed more like ‘hunches’ than reasoned accounts, though this is not to say that they are by nature less accurate. Finally, beginner teachers seemed more concerned with their direct strategies for managing the classroom and organizing students’ learning, while experienced teachers leaned more towards concerns of student engagement. Relational skills and lesson planning skills may be more automated for more experienced teachers, freeing up time to consider other aspects of the student experience. Also, for beginner teachers, the stress of having junior status in the workplace (and with this, a potential lack of job security) could affect the ability to translate instructional goals into reality.
Implications for teacher training. It seems likely that beginner teachers will gain much of the knowledge of experienced teachers through the course of teaching, but can this process be expedited? What could beginners learn from the experienced teachers in this study? I see two of the most important ‘take-home’ messages as being fundamentally linked: English teachers seem uniquely positioned to connect with students, and such connections, when harnessed for literature teaching, provide crucial opportunities for life/wisdom learning. But such moves require that beginner teachers feel confident and comfortable in building open and positive student-teacher relationships, and find themselves able to manage the classroom in a way that supports these relationships.

Perhaps beginner teachers should be allotted extra time to plan classroom activities, since they have not yet automated the planning and decision-making processes of experienced teachers. This could help beginners to feel more confident in their teaching, and more comfortable with student-led departures. Although one beginner teacher, Holly, described a very negative mentorship relationship with an experienced teacher, it does seem that greater mentorship opportunities would expose beginners to the knowledge of more experienced teachers. This is one place where teacher education could be important.

Beginners have general knowledge about teaching, but followers of Shulman (1987) would argue that they need guidance and practice to build the pedagogical content knowledge necessary for skilled teaching.

7.2 Connections with Prior Theory and Research

In the discussion of results, a variety of connections were described between English teachers’ beliefs and practices and the theories of psychological wisdom researchers. This study alone can neither confirm nor refute the views of wisdom researchers.
presented in the introductory sections. But, a surprising level of support for items as varied and specific as imaginative stimulation and narrative selfhood allows me to cautiously suggest that, at least in some cases, teachers are in agreement with wisdom researchers about how literature and teaching relate to the development of wisdom (Brockmeier, 2009; Bruner, 1986; Oatley, 1999). Self-reflection in particular seems to be a commonplace teaching practice in English classes that intersects with ‘thinking skills’ views of wisdom like Sternberg’s balance theory (Sternberg, 2001b). Below, I will look to some specific connections between wisdom theories, instructional models, and the results of the present study.

Participants in this study described beliefs about teaching that certainly seem to support a personal growth model, as well as some instances of interest in skills focused and critical literacy focused models of teaching. Personal growth and critical literacy/cultural analysis models, both at face value (in theoretical descriptions), and as described by teachers, seemed most connected to life and wisdom learning (see Cox, 1991). As well, teachers in this study suggested that a skills focus was incommensurate with life/wisdom learning.

A personal growth model, described by Cox (1991) and others, is based on interest in students’ individual growth and life learning, established primarily through teaching that supports personal connections with literature. Teachers in the present study did seem to support a personal growth model, with universal support for seeking life themes in texts and nurturing students’ self-text/experience-text connections, encouraging a self-reflective approach to literary learning, and acknowledging and supporting students’ individual differences. A personal growth model is also associated with the fact
that teachers generally considered relational aspects of teaching to be important, and some seemed to be aware that this places them in a unique position. As I noted earlier, the present findings appear to support the continued dominance of a personal growth model. But, there was significant variation in the extent to which teachers’ personal growth models encompassed the goals of ‘teaching for wisdom.’ There was general support for life learning in the English classroom, but while some teachers were passionately connected to teaching for wisdom, others expressed ambivalence or outright rejection. While there was universal interest in self-reflection, other cognitive skills deemed important for wisdom (such as metacognition and imaginative simulation) received far less attention, especially from beginner teachers. Personal growth models seem to fall under the umbrella of approaches to teaching for wisdom suggested by Sternberg and others, but they do not meet all of the objectives contained therein. A personal growth model for teaching seems to be necessary, but not sufficient, to engender the kind of learning that wisdom researchers desire.

With this caveat in place, British research showed that teachers’ instructional models appear to be resistant to change in the face of curricular overhauls, at least where personal growth models are concerned (Dixon, 2009, Goodwyn & Findlay, 1999; Hardman & Williamson, 1993). If teaching for wisdom is likened (at least in part) to teaching for personal growth, then this stability could be a good thing for those who propose to teach for wisdom. Teachers might be more receptive to proposals that fall in line with their current goals.

Also, instructional goals are subject to change in line with competing demands, as Goodwyn & Findlay (2002) described. So even if teachers’ preferred instructional models
are related to teaching for wisdom, their practices are subject to change according to the needs of particular courses and contexts. This brings me back to teachers’ concerns about skills-based models (like Cox’s cross-curricular and adult needs models), and models that only support knowledge of a narrow canon (like Cox’s cultural heritage model; Cox, 1991). Although some research on Cox’s models (Goodwyn, 1992) suggested that these models could productively coexist, later research (Goodwyn & Findlay, 1999) found friction between competing goals. If teachers must teach to a narrow set of standardized competencies, then space to express a personal growth model becomes more limited. So it appears that any proposal to teach for wisdom must consider the wider picture of what teachers are asked to do in the classroom, and what kinds of student learning are accepted as valid outcomes. Do psychological researchers wish to shift learning to a critical and student-centred mode, or do they wish to maintain the status quo while asking teachers and students to take on additional tasks?

The present study has linked wisdom learning and English learning through the concept of critical literacy, bringing new directions to research about teaching for wisdom. Like Cox’s (1991) cultural analysis model, critical literacy encourages a social justice lens that helps students to questions their assumptions about the world. This includes (and expands upon) the ‘reflective orientation,’ ‘balance,’ or ‘value relativism’ suggested in wisdom models (Ardelt, 2003; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 2001b). I have presented the argument that these critical perspectives must be a part of any learning that aims to prepare students for ‘life’ (as holistically-conceived). The Ontario curriculum also positions such learning as a valued goal, and many of the teachers in the present study conveyed beliefs about teaching that support a critical
literacy/cultural analysis model. Goodwyn and Findlay (1999) suggested that this model seems to be growing in popularity, so in this sense, wisdom-related learning may be increasingly valued by teachers.

7.3 Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study provides an example of applied research on teaching for wisdom, an area that thus far has been neglected in the literature on psychological wisdom research. The present study provides an experience-close, ‘bottom-up’ account, to engage with the experience-far, ‘top-down’ ideas presented by wisdom researchers. Such dialogues could hold significant value in illuminating the connections (and disjunctions) between theory and practice in the area of teaching for wisdom.

When describing the methodology of this study, I noted that generalizability is neither a goal nor a possibility for this kind of qualitative study, though the present findings add to a knowledge base that could generate new questions for study, and potentially point to wider conclusions. This study centres on the experiences of a very specific group: Greater Toronto Area secondary school English teachers who were nominated as exceptional teachers/teacher candidates. The specificity of the sample means that many voices are not represented in the results; for example, those of rural teachers, or teachers not nominated as exceptional. A future study could sample from more variable populations to seek a wider range of views and experiences.

This study’s focus on teachers’ views means that other important parties are not part of the analysis. The absence of students’ voices seems most problematic, as it is their lives, and their wisdom, which are the target of teaching for life and wisdom. Thus, for a future study, I suggest that students’ thoughts and opinions also ought to be included. In
addition, an observation or fieldwork component in a future study would also help to reveal the ways that life and wisdom enter the classroom.

8. Conclusion

In light of the results outlined above, do we need a specialized wisdom curriculum to teach for wisdom in English class, as Sternberg has proposed? It seems that the stage is already set for many of Sternberg’s proposals, for example around discussions of community, interests, and the situated nature of knowledge. In fact, this study has suggested that some teachers are already concerned with such wisdom-related learning in their classrooms. The results suggest that life learning is generally a part of English education, and for some teachers, it is a deeply valued priority. However, Sternberg’s specific thinking skills and his interest in the ‘wisdom of the sages’ are not universally supported in current approaches to English teaching. For applied advice, it would be prudent to look to Lipman (2003), whose Philosophy for Children program is meant to unfold over the long term, and to build a supportive community of inquiry in the classroom that extends beyond program-specific tasks. Like Sternberg’s balanced curriculum for wisdom, P4C is meant to engender certain approaches to learning across subjects (Fisher, 2008). If educational psychologists wish to support wisdom in schools, they would do well to consider the example of P4C.

Involving teachers directly in the development of a wisdom curriculum seems fundamentally important, and would help to highlight which details would be most crucial to its reception. In the present study, for example, experienced teachers expressed very strong feelings about the provided texts. If life and wisdom learning is presented as the domain of white males like Russell, Birney, and Shakespeare, then it becomes
“cliché” (Tina); “it’s more support for these types of texts as opposed to texts that might represent my students, texts that are more diverse, texts that deal with, uh, current critical issues” (Frances). Both Tina and Frances were strongly critical of the texts that had been selected for discussion, and felt that prioritizing these texts (even at the research stage) was deeply problematic, as it ‘repeats the cycle’ of prioritizing the Eurocentric, male canon, rather than adding diverse or critical voices that would benefit student learning.

Allen and Kevin thought that their students would not connect with classical texts, so both expressed resistance to the possibility of teaching the provided texts. But Joshua and Renee each had a positive reaction, noting the “quality” (Renee) of the texts. This example demonstrates that experienced teachers hold strong views about their practices, and proposing changes to teaching incites intense reactions. Any new model of teaching will face varying degrees of acceptance and resistance, and despite the positive nature of wisdom, proposals to teach for life/wisdom appear likely to provoke. For a wisdom curriculum to achieve credibility, frontline educators must be a part of its development, and their concerns must be contended with at the earliest stages.

The acquisition of wisdom has long been seen as a strongly positive, or even ideal outcome of human development. Learning that supports ‘wisdom as a way of life’ was a classical ideal, but has long been sidelined in the name of pursuing ‘verifiable’ knowledge (Assmann, 1994; Hadot, 1995; Marrou, 1964). But even today, the figures we consider ‘wise’ have made important strides in human history, and wisdom is both formally and colloquially associated with what is good in life (Baltes, 2004). These observations suggest that the development of wisdom must be universally positive. But if we wish to explore teaching for wisdom, we must contend with the historical record
which notes that wisdom is ultimately an imprecise term embedded in cultural context, and as such, it can change along with considerations of what is ‘good’ (Assmann, 1994; Curnow, 2011). If educational researchers wish to encourage teaching for wisdom, they must cautiously ensure that such a project is undertaken with much ongoing reflection and critical review; in other words, with an approach we might call wise.
References


The scientific study of personal wisdom: From contemplative traditions to neuroscience (pp. 137-164). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.


Appendix

Interview Protocol for Mixed-Methods Study of Expertise in English Teaching

- Can you start by telling me a bit about yourself, in terms of the three most important events that led you to become who you are, or led you to become a teacher?
- Let’s move on to the three texts. For the first text you selected, what would you consider to be the most important aspects to teach to your class? How would you teach this to your class? And what would be a follow-up activity that you would choose for them? [Continue through all three texts, in any order, as determined by the participant.]
- Thinking about these same texts again, do you think that these texts can be used to teach students about life? [Prompt: How would you propose to do that?]  
- How would you describe yourself as a teacher, in terms of characteristics and behaviour? How would you evaluate your strengths and weaknesses?
- As a teacher, how do you behave in difficult situations? Why do you think you behave the way that you do in these types of situations?
- For this question, think about it outside of the context of your life as a teacher, just about your life in a broad way: If there is a fifteen-year-old-girl who wants to get married right away, what should one say or do in such a situation? [adapted from the Berlin wisdom paradigm, e.g. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000]
- For the next question, again thinking about your life in general, is there someone that you would consider the wisest? Why would you say that person is wise? Has that person affected your life? [Prompt: How?] Do you think you could become more like that person? [adapted from Jason et al., 2004]
- In your own life, are there times when you felt you were being wise, or approached being wise? [adapted from Bluck & Glück, 2004]
- Looking back to the three texts, do you think that they could be used to teach for wisdom? [Prompt: How would you do that?]

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Bertrand Russell, ‘What I have lived for;’ Earle Birney, Bushed; William Shakespeare, Macbeth (Act I, Scene iii).
- Now that we’ve talked about wisdom a bit, what do you think wisdom is?
- Do you think that wisdom can be taught?
- Is there a historical figure or literary character that you would consider the wisest?
  Why would you say that person/character is wise? [adapted from Jason et al., 2004]