

# Lit in *colour*

## Diversity in Literature in English Schools

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Commissioned by



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# About the Research team

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# About Lit in Colour

**W**e created Lit in Colour in September 2020 together with race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust. Our aim was to find innovative and practical ways to give schools the support and tools they need to introduce more books by people of colour into the classroom for all ages.

We knew that this was only one part of a much wider debate about inclusion and representation in education. But we believe it is a part that matters deeply: nearly every young person in England studies English Literature until the age of 16, and their study of it develops empathy and understanding.

Books create belonging. They help us see and understand one other. They shine a light on the world. It matters profoundly that the books we read in our formative years reflect the rich diversity of the society we live in.

This research shows us just how much more reflecting we need to do. Building on deep education expertise and extensive engagement with teachers, students, librarians and exam boards, Victoria Elliott

and her team paint a stark picture. The call for greater access to literature that represents and celebrates the young people who populate our classrooms couldn't be louder.

We are very grateful to the research team for this work. I also want to thank the Lit in Colour Advisory Board and our partners Pearson Edexcel, OCR and Oxford University Press for their commitment to the goals of this campaign. Thanks too to the inspirational Bernardine Evaristo, who we are proud to publish, for sharing her unique voice on these issues in the foreword to this report.

The first chapter of Lit in Colour was about understanding the nature and scale of the challenge (or opportunity, if you prefer to look at it that way). The rest of the story must be about how we tackle it. We are committed to play our part, and we invite others to join us and drive meaningful and long-lasting change for all students.

**Tom Weldon, CEO,  
Penguin Random House UK**



# Foreword

Bernardine Evaristo

English literature was once a very narrow field. The voices we heard were predominantly male, mostly middle-class and almost entirely white. In the hierarchy of our society, an entrenched patriarchy that went unchallenged for most of our history, this demographic was considered more important than any other and their writers were prioritised, elevated and celebrated.

Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have witnessed the slow expansion of English literature, a body of work that is improving how it reflects the multiple communities that are at the heart of who we are, not only in terms of gender, but in terms of our multiracial diversity. As publishers slowly open up to a wider range of voices that better reflect the nation, our body of literature is being revitalised and enriched. Yet these more inclusive and progressive advances in our society, have not yet reached the school curriculum, which continues to side-line writers of colour, in spite of a swathe of eligible material. I hate to say it, but our education system has fallen behind the times.

Literature is a curator of our imaginations, and schools are the caretakers of the education of young people — who are being denied access to the glorious, outstanding and often ground-breaking narratives coming out of Britain's Black and Asian communities. Literature is perfect for expanding the understanding of other cultures; for enabling readers to step into the shoes of people who are different to them and thereby cultivating empathy; for working out complex issues of human psychology and behaviour, whether through fiction, non-fiction or poetry. Indeed, literature enables self-contemplation and self-questioning, and a very deep and intimate

engagement with the world. This is powerfully character-forming: our eyes are opened, our minds expanded, our connection to other people enhanced, and our hearts are moved.

So what does it say about our education system if the literature deemed most worthy of study disproportionately represents a whiteness in a multiracial society? Considering the huge potential for emotional, intellectual and imaginative growth offered, how can we accept such an imbalanced provision? How terribly sad that children of colour are unlikely to see people who look like them, who come from their backgrounds, represented in the books they are given to read in school, while white children are denied access to immersing themselves in Black and Asian characters, stories, perspectives and poems.

It's shocking that we are still having to advocate for the issue of widening the curriculum in 2021. I finished my school education over 40 years ago and encountered the same limitations. I cannot believe that progress has been so slow. Nor is this a side-issue to the more important issues around education, but it's a major problem that needs to be addressed now, urgently — or we will continue to fail our children.

Bernardine Evaristo is the author of eight books including *Girl, Woman, Other*. It won the Booker Prize in 2019, making her the first Black woman and the first Black British person to win it in its 50-year history. She is Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University London, a lifetime Vice President of the Royal Society of Literature and President of Rose Bruford College.

"Literature is a curator of our **IMAGINATIONS**, and schools are the caretakers of the education of young people — who are being **DENIED** access to the glorious, outstanding and often ground-breaking narratives coming out of Britain's Black and Asian communities."

Bernardine Evaristo



# Key Findings

34.4%



of school students in England are not White British.

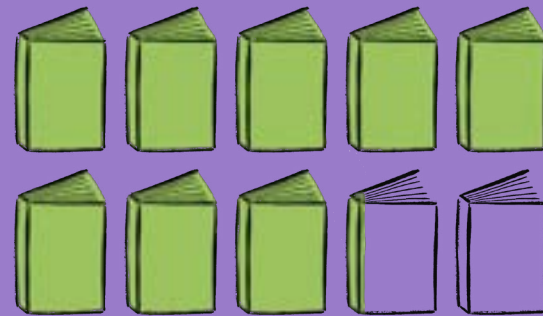
Fewer than

1%



of candidates for GCSE English Literature in 2019 answered a question on a novel by an author of colour. Broadening the range of available texts is necessary but not sufficient to change this.

Poetry is the most common way for secondary students to encounter a Black, Asian or other minority ethnic author; single poems are the easiest texts to insert into the curriculum.



82% of youth survey respondents did not recall ever studying a text by a Black, Asian or minority ethnic author.



No more than 7% of candidates for GCSE English Literature in 2019 answered on a full length novel or play by a woman.

The greatest obstacles to teaching more diverse texts are:

TIME

MONEY

SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE

TEACHER CONFIDENCE

The teaching profession in England is overwhelmingly White and there is evidence that teachers of English have even lower levels of ethnic diversity.

3/4 of teacher survey respondents had never been taught English by a Black, Asian or minority ethnic teacher.

70% of youth survey respondents, rising to 77% of Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic youth survey respondents, agreed that diversity is part of British society and as such should be represented in the school curriculum.



12%

of secondary teacher

and

13%

of primary teacher

survey respondents had training on how to talk about race as part of their initial teacher training.

Race and empire form an important part of knowledge about British literary heritage texts.



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“For too long, many of our students have been marginalised, gazing at the curriculum from the outside while never given the opportunity to see their lived experiences reflected in the stories we share with them. Through our omission and failure to be inclusive, we have subtly communicated with them that their lives, their language and their stories do not matter. While this was never our intention, this was the inevitable outcome as we upheld and revered certain stories while simultaneously failing to tell others.”

Joy Mbakwe, Secondary Head of English, Lilian Baylis Technology School



# Summary of terminology

**T**he language related to race and racialisation (assigning ethnic or racial identities to a group from the outside) has always been contested; there are not fixed categories or definitions and the terminology is always political. Terms relating to race are closely tied into personal and collective identities and preferences; they rely on connotations as well as denotations. This section does not seek to be definitive; rather it explains some of the decisions we have made in the ways we talk about race and ethnicity in this report.

Race is a social construct, principally created as the object of racism: that is, groups were racialised to justify their worse treatment than dominant groups (see Saini, 2019). It is not a biological category: there is more variation within than between racial groups; all people living today are one biological species; people are divided differently into racial groups depending on the nation in which they live (McChesney, 2015).<sup>1</sup> We have capitalised 'White' to reflect that Whiteness is also a construct. To be White is not the neutral state. Black people are not actually black; White people are not actually white.

We acknowledge that there are problems with the term Black, Asian or minority ethnic, namely that it conceals particular inequalities for particular groups, the inequality in educational outcomes between Black Caribbean and Pakistani students for example (Strand, 2014), and it is not a category with which individuals identify. Where possible in this report we have referred to groups by specific name, such as Black British. However, there is still a need for an overall category, in which the groups collected have something in common, namely that they are subject to structural inequality because of their ethnicity.

The terms 'people of colour' or BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) are American and we have argued elsewhere in this report that there are issues in framing race and racism purely in American terms. In the UK there are no Indigenous peoples, given the history of conquest and immigration stretching back thousands of years; and the term BIPOC does not notably include White Ethnic Minorities who are the target of racism, such as Gypsy Roma Travellers or Eastern European migrants, although it is sometimes argued to include these groups.

The survey which forms part of the data for this report did refer to 'authors of colour' in its questions and this term has been used in the reporting of that data. Further discussion of how this term was interpreted by respondents is included in the methodology. The term 'Global Majority Ethnic' has gained some traction and has appeal, but does not have the same level of recognition in the UK as 'BAME'. Hence, where necessary we have used this term. When we do it incorporates not only people of Black and Asian heritage, but also Gypsy Roma Traveller communities.

We also talk of 'diversity' in reading; in this report we are principally talking of diversity of ethnicity in authors and characters, but diversity also includes many other categories which are underrepresented in our schools, including but not limited to LGBTQ+ and disabled people.

<sup>1</sup>McChesney (2015) gives a short but complete and accessible explanation of the science that shows race is not a biological fact.

# Methodology

**T**his report draws on multiple sources of data, triangulating between them: interviews with stakeholders; a survey of primary and secondary teachers; data from Awarding Bodies on text choices; and commissioned qualitative and quantitative research with young people. There are also a number of quotations taken from schools' applications to join the Lit in Colour Pioneers programme (see case study on page 29); these are recognisable by their attributions to schools, not people.



## Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of primary and secondary teachers, to identify and select individuals with rich data relevant to this study, including members of senior leadership teams; representatives from Awarding Bodies; representatives from subject associations and organisations; initial teacher education lecturers; trainee teachers; and some school librarian representatives. In total we conducted 37 interviews lasting between 20 minutes and an hour each with a total of 49 participants.

Four of these interviews have been rendered as case studies within this report: Bishop Grosseteste University and their curriculum diversity project

with PGCEs; Pearson Edexcel's experiences in introducing a more diverse set of GCSE set texts; Ms Joy Mbakwe, a secondary Head of English; and Ms Bola Ayorinde, a Deputy Headteacher who works as an adviser with primary schools diversifying their curriculum. The terminology used in the case studies reflects the language of those interviewees.

## Survey

An online survey of primary teachers and secondary English teachers was carried out. Invitations to participate were distributed via various channels, including the Lit in Colour email newsletter, Twitter and direct emails to schools. Participation was entirely voluntary. A total respondent number of 242 teachers in England was achieved, 78 of whom are primary teachers, 157 of whom secondary (and seven did not respond to the question on school type).

Of the primary respondents, 45.5% were Black, Asian or minority ethnic and 27.6% of the secondary respondents were Black, Asian or minority ethnic, in contrast to approximately 15% of teachers in England in general. There was a good distribution of experience, with a quarter of respondents having been teaching for more than 20 years.



Geographical distribution of the survey respondents is shown in Diagram 1 (primary) and Diagram 2 (secondary). For both phases there was a preponderance of London schools, but the sample was also distributed across the length and breadth of England. Postcodes of schools were gathered to examine clustering of the respondents; 17 schools were represented by more than one teacher. One school had four respondents, two schools had three, and the remaining 11 schools had two respondents each. Therefore the 242 respondents taught in 227 schools in total. A mixture of closed and open questions were used; open responses were coded with discussion and agreement between two researchers.

The questions were worded with the phrasing 'author of colour' or 'character of colour'; the data suggests that respondents interpreted this to include both British and World authors, including Black, Asian, Jewish and other Minority Ethnic groups.

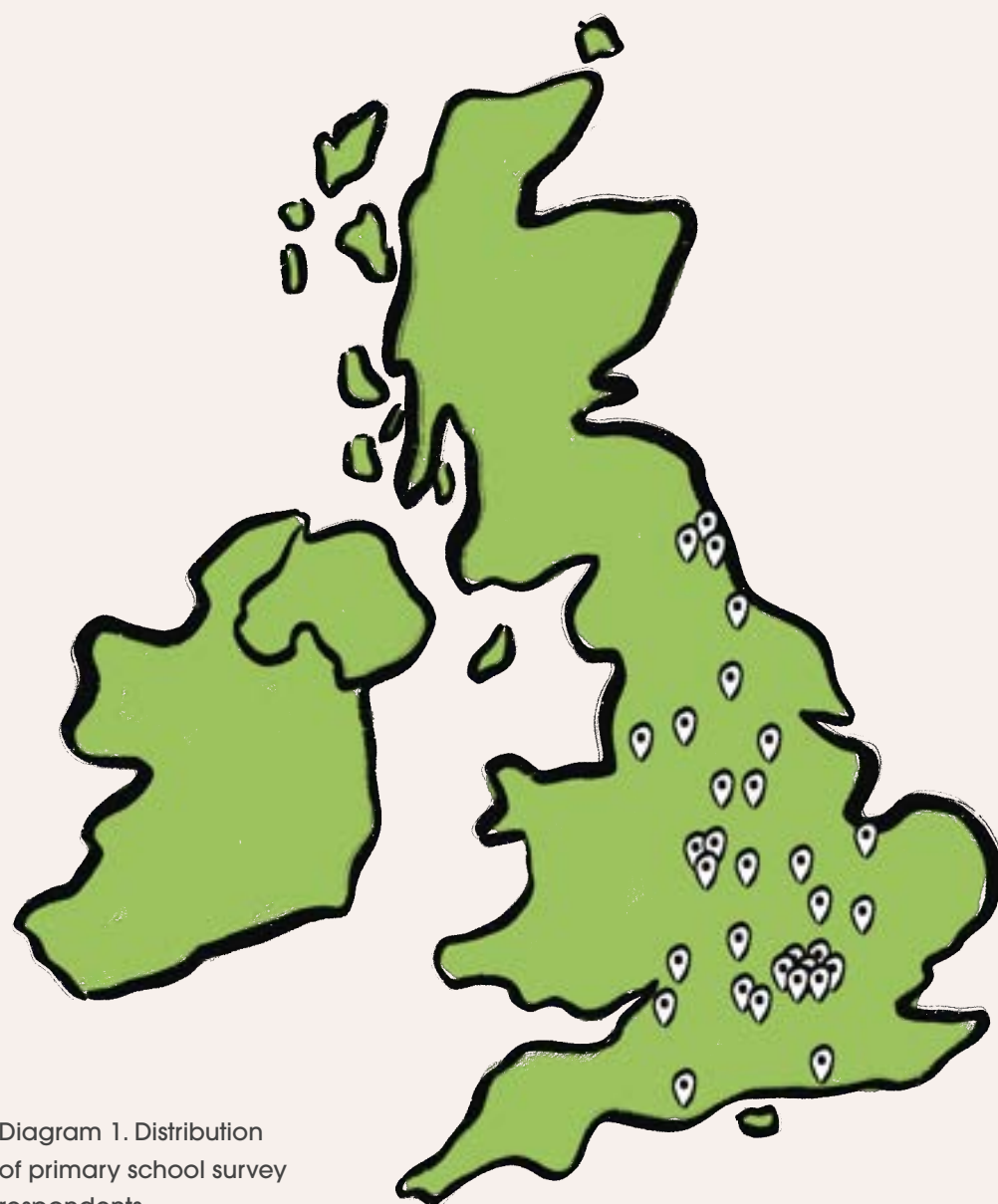


Diagram 1. Distribution of primary school survey respondents

Diagram 2. Distribution of secondary school survey respondents



## Research with young people

Qualitative research with 11-18 year olds was commissioned from youth research agency On Road who used online written data collection methods and a recorded focus group to gather data from 20 young people between 14 and 18 with a mix of gender, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. All quotations from young people within this report come from On Road's report.

In addition a seven minute quantitative survey was conducted by DRG between 15 May 2021 and 24 May 2021 to gain deeper insight into the reading habits of children aged 14-18 and their affinity with English Literature in school. This research targeted schoolchildren aged 14-18 across the UK, achieving



a nationally representative sample of 550 children plus an additional boost of 100 children from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds (to ensure a more robust sample for analysis of this group alone). Results have been weighted to be nationally representative.



# Existing Research

There is surprisingly little empirical research on the teaching of a diverse curriculum. Kneen et al (2021) reports an audit of the Key Stage 3 text choices of 170 schools related to six teacher training partnerships in Wales and the South West as part of an ongoing UKLA funded research project. Key Stage 3 is the first three years of secondary school, where curriculum is largely ungoverned by examination specifications. Malorie Blackman was the only Black author to appear on the top ten novel choices for any of the three year groups, with *Noughts And Crosses*. *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* also appear among the twenty texts which form the three top tens; *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas* is another book which would be characterised as dealing with diversity, albeit one which is problematic (Gray, 2014). *The Hunger Games*, *Holes*, *Stone Cold* and *Private Peaceful* all appear on the top ten choices for two different year groups, giving the lie to the idea that incorporating more diverse literature into the English secondary curriculum would mean dispensing with canonical tomes which represent powerful cultural capital. Kneen et al. (2021) also note that among the top ten poems taught in each year group only two poets of colour – John Agard and Maya Angelou – appear, and no plays by any

authors of colour. Malorie Blackman was also the only author of colour to appear in the top 25 listed by respondents in the ‘Teachers as Readers’ research project when asked to name six ‘good’ writers; notably many of the respondents were unable to name six ‘good’ poets at all, suggesting a level of discomfort with poetry among primary teachers (Collins, 2014).

Race and racism have largely been represented in the English curriculum in the UK historically by *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill A Mockingbird*, both of which were popular GCSE set texts before the 2015 reforms (see also Bennett & Lee-Treweek, 2014). *Of Mice and Men* in particular has moved down into Key Stage 3 since the reform of GCSE. Elliott (2020) argued that a focus on these texts risks framing racism as an ‘American problem’ in English schools, which has consequences for how society views structural racism. Nor do either of these books show the Black character in question through anything but a White gaze. They also present just one narrative of Black life – the experience of racism.

Over the past five years a number of Black British and British Asian authors have published memoirs which include reflection on their school



lives (Akala, 2019; Hirsch, 2018; Eddo-Lodge, 2017), or contributed to various anthologies and manifestos about the Black, Asian and minority ethnic educational experience (e.g. *A Fly Girl's Guide to University* (Younge, 2019); *Taking Up Space* (Kwakye & Ogunbiyi, 2019)). These personal experiences speak to feelings of being unrepresented in curricula, subjected to “erasure” (Olufemi, 2019, p.56), except where the narrative is a “dehumanising experience” of “slavery, colonising, lynching” (Ogunbiyi, 2019, p.70). Bennie Kara, when an assistant headteacher in London, wrote:

*“When I was a teenager, I had a moment of realisation. I didn't fit into the narrative of England, the country I was born in. I couldn't find myself in any of the stories; as a student of literature, I was desperate to feel like I had a place. I sought it out many years later, but I recognise my privilege in being able to.”*  
(Kara, 2017, n.p.)

She argues for the “inclusion of more knowledge, not less” in the curriculum as an answer to this problem (Kara, 2017, n.p.). More than one author argues that the curriculum as it stands conveys the message that “neutral is white” (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 85) and has “imbued white male writers with the power and authority to speak for everyone” (Olufemi, 2019, p. 58). Bishop (1990) conceptualised the role of books in the human experience as being like mirrors and doors:

*“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.”*  
(Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

Reading for pleasure is a key predictor of future success. In 2002 the OECD reported that reading for pleasure was a greater predictor of academic attainment than family socio-economic status (OECD, 2002). The *Reflecting Realities* report from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education shows that just 7% of children's fiction published in the UK in the years 2017, 2018 and 2019 featured a character of Black, Asian or minority ethnic background (CLPE, 2020), although the yearly proportion is rising. In 2019 5% of children's books featured a main character from one of these backgrounds, up from just 1% in 2017 (CLPE, 2020). Despite the increase, this is still a significant under-representation relative to the upwards of 30% of Black, Asian or minority ethnic children in England. Young adult fiction is an important media





for identity formation in teenagers (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019); Chetty (2016) and Ramdarshan Bold (2019) have both noted incidents where young Black people felt that they could only write about White characters because that was all they had been exposed to in their reading matter. Ramdarshan Bold's interviews with Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors of Young Adult fiction indicate that a largely White publishing industry and gatekeeping process has the effect of skewing the publication of Black, Asian and other minority ethnic authors towards those who write with the expectations of a White audience in mind, where, as bell hooks has it, "ethnicity becomes spice" (1992, p. 21). In this context, the *Missing Pages* report published by Teach First in 2020 included data from a Teacher Tapp poll, showing that "91% of secondary school teachers, rising to 98% of English teachers think it is important or very important that literature written by ethnic minority authors is studied as part of the English literature curriculum in secondary schools" (Teach First, 2020, p. 7). The report emphasised the importance of students seeing themselves represented in their curriculum.

In the academic literature there are a number of critical reflections on teaching texts in the contexts of underlying racial discourses written by practising teachers of colour. Mohamud (2020), a Black Muslim trainee English teacher, reflects on her experience as student and teacher and raises the

importance of classroom talk about race, as well as the challenge of managing that talk. She argues:

*"The palpable tension in the class suggested to me that we were not used to talking about race in this personal and confrontational manner. But if we couldn't address, unpick and learn about what made these issues so intensely uncomfortable to begin with, how could we learn at all?"* (2020, p. 385).

She specifically addresses the n-word and the disagreement between the teacher she was observing, a woman of colour but not Black, and her Black students, over whether saying the word in the context of the novel it was used in (*Of Mice and Men*) was different from using it. Olua (2019) makes a powerful case for the symbolic violence inherent in a non-Black person ever using the word (albeit as an American). Bennett & Lee-Treweek (2014), examining constructs of race in predominantly White schools in Cheshire, stress the potential for poor handling of the use of the n-word in *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* to isolate Black, Asian or minority ethnic students where there are only a few of them and generate tension between them and White British students. One of their Black male teen participants related the feeling: "They're kinda looking at you as in, 'That relates to you mate'. You know what I mean? So you're there, like, trying to just bury your head in the book, like" (Bennett & Lee-Treweek, 2014, p.

“

The palpable **TENSION** in the class suggested to me that we were not used to talking about race in this personal and confrontational manner. But if we couldn't address, unpick and **learn** about what made these issues so intensely uncomfortable to begin with, how could we learn at all?

(2020, p. 385)

”

41). Bennet & Lee-Treweek also noted that the teachers in their schools were uncomfortable discussing racism and had little incentive to do so. Lander (2011) explores the lack of preparation of trainee secondary teachers to deal with race-related issues in schools, and argues that her interviews reveal the "embedded nature of Whiteness" within Initial Teacher Education which damages the "mainly White, trainees" preparedness to teach Black, Asian or minority ethnic pupils as they rely on deficit models of equity in education. However, Bhopal & Rhamie (2014) just three years later found multifaceted and complex understandings of race and diversity among trainee secondary teachers, although they also recommended that beginning teachers needed more practical assistance for handling diversity in the classroom.

There are a small number of articles which deal with teaching canonical literature in a multicultural context. Iffath (2020) reflects on a variety of experiences teaching literature in a multicultural

London classroom in the context of colonial legacy, including Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*. She notes that many of the texts on the curriculum are problematic and states that it is important to explicitly acknowledge this and address it. Similarly Hippiisley (2019) reflects on teaching *Heart of Darkness* as a Sri Lankan-born female teacher, incidentally noting the domination of English in Further Education colleges by White male middle-class teachers, and the fact that her race resulted in her being assumed by others to be a teacher of English as an Additional Language rather than a 'real' English teacher. Hippiisley notes that teaching texts in which racism plays a key role was a more difficult experience for her than other canonical works. Shah (2013) relates teaching *The Scarlet Letter* to a class largely composed of Muslim boys, as a female hijab-wearing Asian Muslim teacher, and the ways that their perceptions of her identity mediated their spoken responses to the text. These teachers share in common an appreciation of the value of teaching the canon, reflecting on the

particular richness of considering canonical texts in the light of multicultural contexts and appropriately mediating the text for students. Shah (2013), for example, shows a student drawing on the Islamic folklore of *djinn* to explore a character's concern that her daughter is possessed in *The Scarlet Letter*, emphasising "the cultural capital to be gained through the reading of heritage texts through the prism of diverse multicultural histories" as opposed to the 'assumed deficit' (p. 200) of the promotion of an Arnoldian 'best that has been thought and said' approach to English literature teaching. Shah (2020) and Hippisley (2020) relate other examples of the richness of cross-cultural reading in relation to *Jane Eyre* and *The Duchess of Malfi* respectively.

Ahmed (2018) reports the first phase of a linguistic ethnography of English literature teaching, in relation to the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* in a multi-cultural classroom, in which around a third of the class are of Romanian heritage and another third Pakistani. She relates the benefits for the accretion of knowledge surrounding the text when a male Pakistani heritage student challenges the teacher's presentation of Paris and Juliet as an 'arranged marriage', framing it instead as a 'forced marriage', drawing on his own contextual knowledge of consensual arranged marriages, which also reveals the potential of canonical texts to contribute to cultural misunderstandings between groups if contextual knowledge is not used appropriately.



Another small focus in the literature is the 'Poems from Other Cultures' module which formed part of the previous incarnation of GCSE before the 2015 reformed specifications. Rogers (2015) discusses the ways in which the strong framing provided by the 'Other Cultures' directs the ways in which students and teachers approach the poems, making their 'otherness' their defining feature. Daljit Nagra's poem 'Kabba Questions the Ontology of Representation, the Catch 22 for 'Black' Writers...' mocks the collecting of 'Black' poets in a way that frames "us/ as a bunch of Gunga Dins" (Nagra, 2007, p. 42). Johnstone (2011) draws on his own experience teaching the poems in an independent multicultural London school to argue for the ways in which such poems actually come to represent 'our' culture, not 'others' in enabling students to consider them in the context of multiracial, multicultural Britain. Rogers (2020) argues that the anthology represented a division of English into 'literary' and 'cultural' texts, with the poets of colour situated firmly on the 'cultural' side.

Boehmer and Lombard (2019), reporting on the Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds project, noted that their readers enjoyed the "central focus on the everyday lives and perspectives of ordinary people (rather than more challenging narratives of spectacular violence, poverty, etc.)" (p. 117) of the books in the project. Similarly Chetty (2016) has warned against the consideration of works of writers of colour only as 'issue' books.

The picture from the research literature then is limited, and largely focused on small scale, personal reflections. It highlights the possibilities of thinking broadly about context in relation to canonical texts; it also notes the problematic framing of 'otherness' in relation to the handful of Black, Asian or minority ethnic poets on the curriculum historically. The appropriate language to use to discuss issues of race and racism is identified as a site of tension for teachers and students.

"I couldn't find myself  
in any of the stories;  
as a student of literature,  
I was DESPERATE to feel  
like I had a PLACE"

Bennie Kara (2017)

# What is being Taught?



## Primary Schools

In Key Stage 2, as well as texts taught directly through the curriculum such as the class reader topic book, or supporting texts to a topic, the major source of access to literature is independent reading. Independent reading includes levelled reading schemes by the major publishers as well as commercial children's fiction. This provides plenty of opportunities for a wide range of book encounters; only eight out of 78 primary respondents answered that they taught no books by authors of colour to students. This is the context, however, of a much larger number of texts per year than in secondary: there is still room for a greater diversity of content in the primary classroom. Primary interviewees reflected on the need for greater representation in the classroom, and better understanding of how to talk about and mediate these texts for students.

Malorie Blackman was the most popular author for primary, mentioned 14 times with a spread of texts; Benjamin Zephaniah was mentioned 12 times, two of which were in the context of *Refugee Boy*, six in the context of his poetry and a further four where only his name was mentioned. Onjali Q. Raúf's *The Boy at the Back of the Classroom* is taught by seven teachers, and Sharna Jackson's *High Rise Mystery* by five. The most popular fiction texts are therefore by two of the most famous Black

British writers writing for children today, and two novels which are very recent and which have won awards. Fiction texts were by far the most commonly mentioned by primary respondents, with 55 separate books mentioned. *Handa's Surprise* was mentioned by three teachers, only one of whom appeared aware that it was written by a White woman. A classic of British children's books, it represents a very stereotypical view of Africa, which can provide an unbalanced view if not mediated by the teacher or counterpointed by other texts. Aside from Benjamin Zephaniah, Shel Silverstein's 'The Giving Tree' was the most popular poem and only nine poets were mentioned in total.

A few non-fiction texts were mentioned: *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly was mentioned by three respondents, as was Vashti Harrison's *Little Leaders*. The use of the *Little People, Big Dreams* series and *Little Leaders* demonstrates the value and impact a well-curated themed series can have in providing a route into showcasing Black, Asian and minority ethnic people in the primary classroom. There is, however, a risk that the use of such texts suggests only extraordinary Black, Asian and minority ethnic people can be valued by society, rather than celebrating the full range of experience.

One of the interviewees who works as a teacher educator spoke in her capacity as the mother of





mixed-race children to note that for young children appearance tends to be the first marker through which they recognise difference. She argued that primary schools needed “to account for this in a celebratory way, not just intervene on this when problems with racism have already taken place” and that this required “good texts written by and featuring people of colour.” Another interviewee suggested that Key Stage 2 provided a good opportunity to consider heritage texts in the context of race and empire, beginning to explore texts in context in a way which would support their transition to secondary school.

Forty of the primary respondents to the survey said that either before or in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 their schools were making changes to increase the diversity of their curriculum, although several said that they did not feel these changes went far enough.

## Secondary Schools

Secondary schools are generally divided into three key stages: Key Stage 3 from Years 7-9 (ages 11-14); Key Stage 4 or GCSE which runs from Years 10-11 (ages 14-16); and Key Stage 5, years 12 and 13 (ages

16-18) during which A levels or IB courses are studied. Some schools place Year 9 into Key Stage 4 in order to run a three-year GCSE course. In this section first we address the texts studied for external examination, GCSE followed by A Level, and then consider the data about Key Stage 3 and secondary school as a whole. There are four Awarding Bodies who have qualifications licensed by the regulator Ofqual for English Literature in England: AQA, Eduqas, OCR and Pearson Edexcel.

### GCSE – Key Stage 4

Studying English Language is compulsory to age 16 and the way that school performance tables are calculated means that a very large majority of those who study English Language GCSE also study English Literature GCSE. Just over half a million students studied for a GCSE in English Literature in 2019. Tables 1-4 show the data on text choice for the post-1914 British text (prose or play) for GCSE English literature entries in 2017, 2018 and 2019. These are the three examination series that took place post qualifications reform. The post-1914 British text is the only place where Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors are represented on the specifications, apart from in the poetry anthologies. There were only two full prose texts by authors of colour – *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal and *Never Let*

Table 1. AQA

Set Modern Text	% of all candidates		
	2017	2018	2019
<i>An Inspector Calls</i> by J.B. Priestley	65.53	69.46	73.33
<i>Blood Brothers</i> by Willy Russell	9.96	9.79	8.84
<i>The History Boys</i> by Alan Bennett	0.81	0.68	0.40
<i>DNA</i> by Dennis Kelly	3.21	2.78	2.34
<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i> (play adaptation) by Simon Stephens	1.08	0.95	0.69
<i>A Taste of Honey</i> by Shelagh Delaney	0.49	0.42	0.41
<i>Lord of the Flies</i> by William Golding	9.30	8.01	7.06
<i>Short Story Anthology</i>	1.66	0.79	0.57
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell	5.92	5.70	5.12
<b><i>Never Let Me Go</i>* by Kazuo Ishiguro</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>0.45</b>
<b><i>Anita &amp; Me</i>* by Meera Syal</b>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>0.08</b>	<b>0.07</b>
<i>Pigeon English</i> by Stephen Kelman	1.02	0.76	0.71

Table 2. OCR

Set Modern Text	% of all candidates		
	June 2017	June 2018	June 2019
<b><i>Anita &amp; Me</i>* by Meera Syal</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>2.0</b>
<b><i>Never Let Me Go</i>* by Kazuo Ishiguro</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>8.9</b>
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell	17.8	20.5	20.7
<i>An Inspector Calls</i> by J.B. Priestley	64.7	63.7	64.8
<i>My Mother Said I Never Should</i> by Charlotte Keatley	0.2	0.2	0.8
<i>DNA</i> by Dennis Kelly	5.2	4.6	2.8

\*Denotes a text by a person by an author of colour

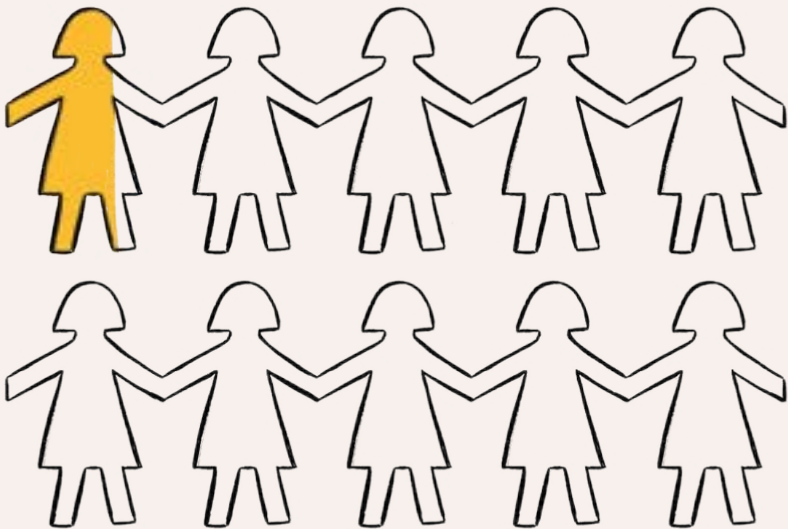
Table 3.  
Pearson Edexcel

Set Modern Text	% of all candidates		
	2017	2018	2019
<i>An Inspector Calls</i> by J.B. Priestley	59.0	60.2	62.4
<i>Hobson’s Choice</i> by Harold Brighouse	1.0	1.1	1.1
<i>Blood Brothers</i> by Willy Russell	11.0	9.9	9.4
<i>Journey’s End</i> by R.C. Sherriff	5.0	4.9	5.4
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell	10.0	9.2	8.9
<i>Lord of the Flies</i> by William Golding	8.0	6.6	6.7
<b><i>Anita &amp; Me</i>* by Meera Syal</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>0.1</b>
<i>The Woman in Black</i> by Susan Hill	5.0	4.1	3.6

Table 4. Eduqas

Set Modern Text	% of all candidates		
	June 2017	June 2018	June 2019
<i>Lord of the Flies</i> by William Golding	11.1	9	9.8
<b><i>Anita &amp; Me</i>* by Meera Syal</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>0.4</b>
<b><i>Never Let Me Go</i>* by Kazuo Ishiguro</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.6</b>
<i>The Woman in Black</i> by Susan Hill	3.9	3.2	2.6
<i>Oranges are not the Only Fruit</i> by Jeanette Winterson	0.4	0.2	0.4
<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i> (play adaptation) by Simon Stephens	1.5	1	0.9
<i>A Taste of Honey</i> by Shelagh Delaney	0.9	0.6	0.6
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell	55.8	60.2	60.3
<i>The History Boys</i> by Alan Bennett	1.4	1.3	1
<i>Blood Brothers</i> by Willy Russell	24.9	24.4	24.7

\*Denotes a text by a person by an author of colour



*Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro – on the specifications in these years. Additionally, AQA’s short story anthology includes two stories by authors of colour out of seven, one by British Jamaican author Claudette Williams and one by Kazuo Ishiguro; *Pigeon English* is by a White author but its protagonist is a Ghanaian British boy.

Pearson Edexcel updated their choice of texts to include an additional four works by Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors – *The Empress* by Tanika Gupta, *Refugee Boy* (the play adapted from Benjamin Zephaniah’s novel by Lemn Sissay), *Coram Boy* by Jamila Gavin and *Boys Don’t Cry* by Malorie Blackman. These texts would have been first available for examination in 2020, so have not been examined because of assessment changes due to Covid-19. OCR has also recently announced its intention to further diversify its text choices at GCSE and A level as part of its commitment to the Lit in Colour project.

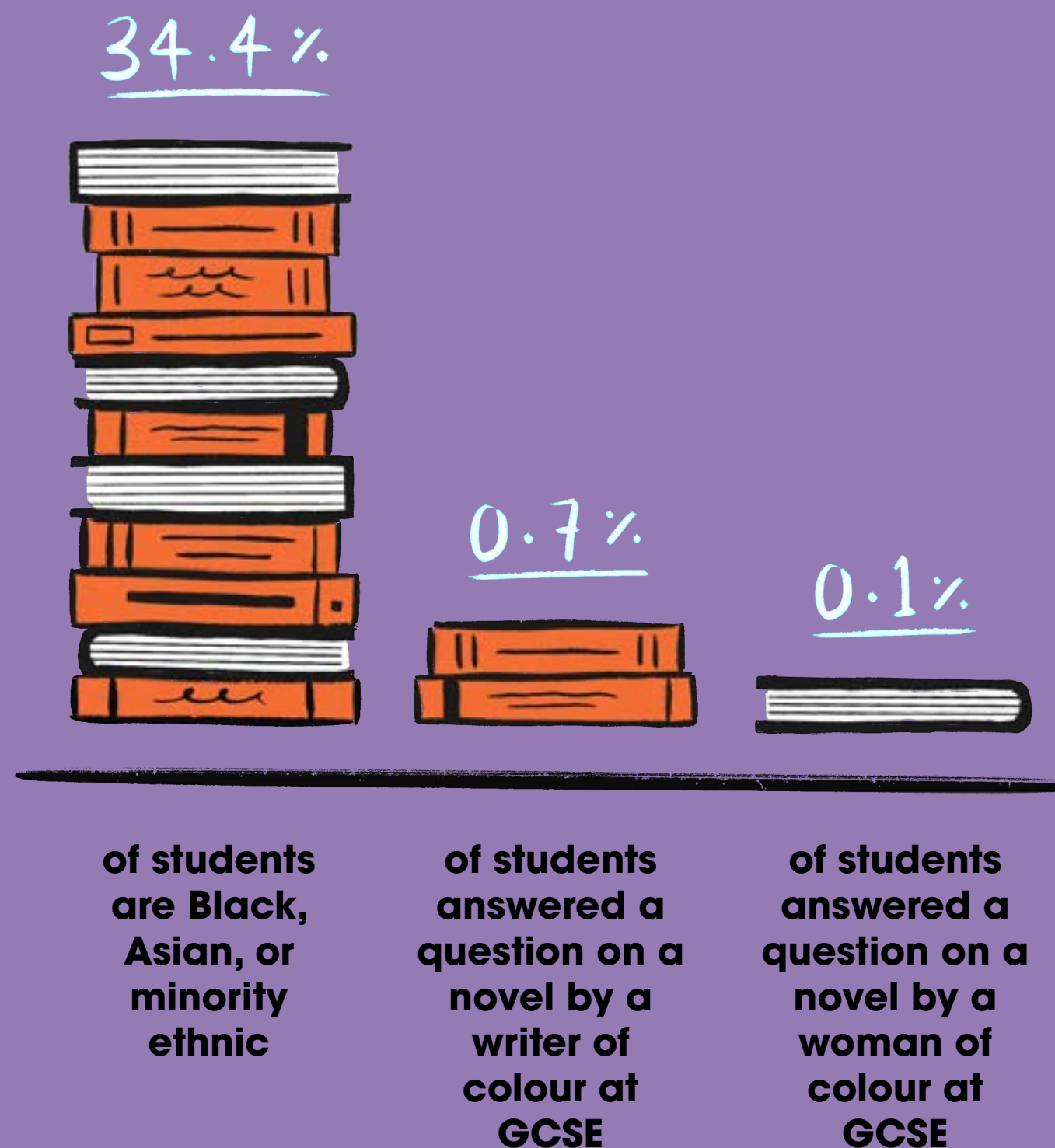
The figures in tables 1-4 depend on examiners entering question numbers correctly into the online systems, so there is a level of human error incorporated into the numbers. In 2019, AQA had 78.8% of the market share for English Literature GCSE, Pearson Edexcel 9.4%, OCR 2.1% and Eduqas 9.7%. In 2019, utilising the proportion of

text choices and the level of candidate entry for each of the four specifications approved for use in England we can say that of the 537,355 candidates who took GCSE English Literature approximately 3,700 students answered a question on a novel by an author of colour, c. 0.7%.<sup>2</sup> Just 0.1% answered on *Anita and Me*, the only novel by a woman of colour. This is compared to 34.4% of students in schools who are not White British (Tereschenko et al., 2020). Availability of diverse texts to choose is not enough for a diverse curriculum at GCSE. The figures suggest that over time schools are converging on *An Inspector Calls* as their modern text of choice.

Although outside of the remit of this report, the figures for the numbers of candidates answering on a modern text by a woman is also concerning: c. 1%. Students are also required to study a 19th century novel, which offers further opportunities for studying a text by a woman. In 2019 an estimated 6% of candidates answered on a 19th century novel by a woman (based on data from AQA, Eduqas and OCR). These two figures are not mutually exclusive, so we can say therefore that between 6 and 7% of students study a full length novel or play by a woman at GCSE.

In addition to the modern set texts, there are some poems by Black, Asian or minority ethnic

<sup>2</sup> Candidate entry data can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-qualifications-market-report-academic-year-2018-to-2019>. We can only say how many candidates answered on a given text, but this is a reasonable proxy for the number of students who studied that text. A few candidates choose to answer exam questions on texts they have not studied.



**\*Students in England in 2019**

authors set for study. OCR's 45 poems across three clusters include four poems by Black poets and two by Asian poets. AQA's 30 poems include two poems by Asian poets and one by a Black poet. Pearson Edexcel did have five poems spread across two of its three clusters by one Asian and four Black poets; their newly diversified specification which has not yet been examined includes a new cluster called 'Belonging', in which, of the post 1914 poems, there are three Black poets, two White poets, one each from mixed-race Asian and White, and from mixed-race Black and White heritage, one Asian poet and one Kurdish. Poetry remains the most likely place for a secondary student to encounter a text by an author of colour.

### A level – Key Stage 5

In comparison to over half a million students taking GCSE English Literature in 2019, just 36,920 students entered for A level English Literature. Of the young people surveyed who were not studying or did not intend to study English Literature at A level, 57.4% agreed that "More diversity in the writers and stories we study" would make them more excited to continue with English at or after A level.

At A level, as with GCSE, there are limited choices of set texts which are by authors of colour: AQA has two specifications each with two set texts by authors of colour (A: Arundhati Roy *The God of Small Things* and Alice Walker *The Color Purple*; B: Andrea Levy *Small Island* and Khaled Hosseini *The Kite Runner*); Pearson Edexcel has five (Alice Walker *The Color Purple*, Sam Selvon *The Lonely Londoners*, Kazuo Ishiguro *Never Let Me Go*, Toni Morrison *Beloved*, and Khaled Hosseini *A Thousand Splendid Suns*) and there are three poems out of 20 in the compulsory poetry anthology by poets of colour, one by Patience Agbabi, one by Daljit Nagra and one by Tishani Doshi; and OCR has one (Mohsin Hamid *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*) although it also lists eight texts by authors of colour recommended as comparative reading for the set texts. OCR is the only Awarding Body to monitor and record the names of texts used for Non-Examined Assessment (coursework); in an interview OCR English Subject Adviser Isobel Woodger noted that Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* had

become a very popular choice for NEA following its Booker Prize win in 2020. There is often a boost for recent Booker winners but this was a particularly large and rapid increase. At A level text choice is not recorded in the same way after examination so that it is not possible to say how many students are studying these choices.

Of the 84 survey respondents who taught A level or IB English Literature, 44 taught a text by an author of colour, either a novel or the poetry in the Pearson Edexcel anthology (n=27) or both. A further seven mentioned that their students chose a text in this category for their NEA, and nine included diverse authors via extracts to support various texts. 24 teachers did not teach any texts by an author of colour as part of their A level teaching.

The young people interviewed disliked how many books they study are written by White middle-aged men; the lack of different perspectives (no LGBTQ+ or non-White perspectives) and the lack of modern books and authors. They also disliked the time pressure on them having to read a book in a short space of time for assignments, the unnatural way of reading a book in school (a couple of pages in class and then wait weeks to read more), and the open interpretation of texts (as opposed to the one right answer in sciences).

*"I really enjoy studying Macbeth - I love the themes and the characters, and find it interesting. In fact this is the same with An Inspector Calls and Jekyll and Hyde - however, I only liked them when I began to study them in depth. However, my issue with them is they're all old texts - it would be interesting to read one by a modern author, and all written by heterosexual cis white men, which isn't firstly good representation, but also means no variation in perspective, so I think they should change that."*  
Bethan, 15

*"I feel like it's not a good representation of the population, most books taught in school are written by middle class white men."*  
Zoe, 18





70% of youth survey respondents, rising to 77% of Black, Asian or minority ethnic youth survey respondents, agreed that diversity is part of British society and as such should be represented in the school curriculum.

The wider secondary curriculum

At Key Stage 3 the curriculum is much freer, as it is not limited by exam specifications. However, it is also much harder to find out what is being taught. The survey data is unlikely to be representative, as it has a higher proportion of Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers than would be expected from the profession, and it is likely to have been taken by people who are interested in issues of racial diversity. However, there is a large degree of centralisation of curriculum decisions; most teachers do not have full control over what they

teach. About 25% of primary teachers said they chose the texts they taught, and in secondary a similar proportion had control over their text choices at Key Stage 3 with much lower levels at Key Stages 4 and 5. With these caveats the following data was generated from the survey respondents.

The majority of student contact with texts by authors of colour is via poetry, largely because of its ease to include in the curriculum, according to survey respondents. One White secondary survey respondent said “I genuinely believed the only literature written by people of colour was poetry. I understand why poetry is often used to explore different experiences – it is brief, deep, well-attuned to capture a multifaceted snapshot of a lived experience. But it never gives Black, Asian or minority ethnic literature a chance to breathe.”

A total of 79 different poets were named by respondents to the survey. The top ten poets mentioned by survey respondents are given in table 5. The most mentioned, John Agard, had one poem, ‘Checkin’ Out Me History’ mentioned by 17 respondents; after this the most popular were Imtiaz Dharker’s ‘Tissue’ (12), Maya Angelou’s ‘Still I Rise’ (9), Grace Nichols’s ‘Island Man’ (8) and Moniza Alvi’s ‘Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan’ (8).

Table 5. Top ten poets mentioned by secondary respondents

Poet	Number of mentions	Appears on GCSE syllabus?
John Agard	74	Yes
Imtiaz Dharker	48	Yes
Maya Angelou	37	No
Grace Nichols	31	Yes
Benjamin Zephaniah	25	Yes
Moniza Alvi	14	Yes
Sujata Bhatt	11	Yes
Daljit Nagra	10	Yes
Langston Hughes	10	No
Jackie Kay	6	Yes

“

“I feel like it’s not a good **representation** of the population, most books taught in school are written by **middle class white men.**”

Zoe, 18

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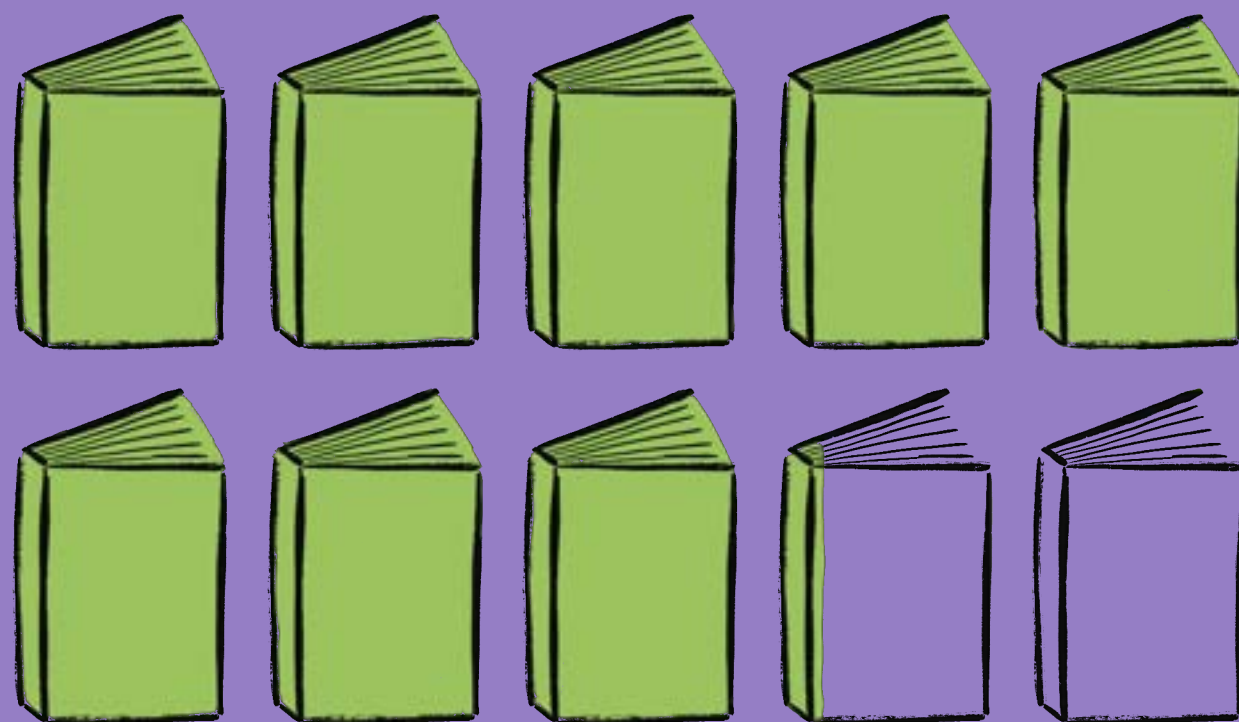
Seven full length prose texts were mentioned by ten or more secondary respondents: *Noughts and Crosses* (Malorie Blackman, 27); *Refugee Boy* (Benjamin Zephaniah, 16, whose *Face* was also taught by six teachers); *The Color Purple* (Alice Walker, 14); *The Kite Runner* (Khaled Hosseini, 14); *Things Fall Apart* (Chinua Achebe, 12); *The Hate U Give* (Angie Thomas, 11); and the English and Media Centre’s *Diverse Shorts* (10). Only two of these (*The Color Purple* and *The Kite Runner*) appear on the A level specifications and none appear on the GCSE specifications. *The Hate U Give*, like two of the most popular novels for primary students, is a recent and award-winning text.

Speeches are another popular way to include diverse voices in the curriculum. Secondary respondents mentioned 19 different speakers, seven

of whom were mentioned by more than one teacher: Martin Luther King (10); Barack Obama (7); Malala Yousafzai (5); Nelson Mandela (5); Chimanda Ngozi Adichie (3); Chief Joseph (2) and John Boyega (2).

Of 126 respondents who teach Year 7, 44 teach no texts by a person of colour (35%), which rises to 69 if we exclude poetry (55%).<sup>3</sup> Of 125 respondents who teach Year 8, 35 teach no texts by a person of colour (28%), which rises to 60 if we exclude poetry (48%). Of 133 respondents who teach Year 9, 39 teach no texts by a person of colour (29%), which rises to 57 if we exclude poetry (43%). 14 secondary

<sup>3</sup>Any respondent who just gave a name where the author is known for either poetry or prose was counted as prose.



**82% of youth survey respondents did not recall ever studying a text by a Black, Asian or minority ethnic author**

respondents teach no texts of any kind by an author of colour in Key Stage 3 (9%).

*"We only did diversity during Black History Month and haven't done much since with diverse novels."*  
Adam, 14

Most of the young people interviewed had had no exposure to books with Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors or Black, Asian or minority ethnic protagonists in school apart from poetry, and the texts they had read related to experiences of racism and 82% of youth survey respondents did not recall ever studying a text by a Black, Asian or minority ethnic author. Interviewees were, however, interested in racism and felt it was important to study it.

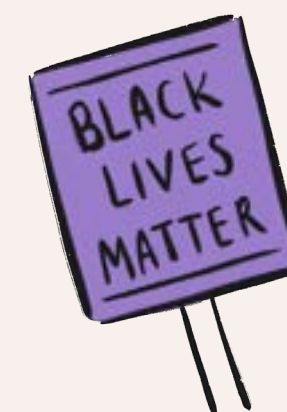
*"Noughts and Crosses switched up the whole game for me. Topics such as racism interest me as a person, but growing up you only learn about it one way mainly through school [which doesn't reflect the full experience]."*  
Nehaal, 16

Almost a third of Black, Asian or minority ethnic young people surveyed (27.4%) agreed that 'the books I study in English Literature make me feel like I don't belong', as opposed to 14.5% of White students. Representation – or lack of it – is felt on a personal level by young people.

129 secondary teacher respondents reported that their schools were making changes to diversify the curriculum prior to or following the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. These changes varied widely between adding poetry and extracts to existing units, changing some main texts, adding units etc. One teacher mentioned a new extract-based non-fiction unit in which they have ensured 50% of texts are written by people of colour.

The mention of John Boyega's speech is directly attributable to Black Lives Matter as it was made at a Black Lives Matter protest. As Barbara Bleiman of the English and Media Centre noted, although it feels like this change is a new thing, it is in fact a continuation of a long-standing conversation about increasing racially diverse representation in English teaching. Respondents in the survey whose curricula were set by their multi-academy trust sometimes expressed concern that they were unable to take the initiative to diversify their curriculum, or that their curriculum did not suit their particular school.

There is no evidence in our data for any teaching of texts by or about Gypsy Roma Traveller communities.



“

**51.7% of the young people surveyed agreed that 'the English Literature curriculum doesn't reflect the *diversity* of British society today.'**

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## CASE STUDY

## Pearson Edexcel – Diversifying GCSE Set Texts

**P**earson Edexcel became the first Awarding Organisation to diversify its GCSE set texts with the announcement of four additional post-1914 British texts for first examination in 2020. Covid-19 has meant these texts have not been examined yet. Drawing on the expertise of teachers and researchers, the Pearson Edexcel English team put together a list of texts which they felt had the depth to support the kinds of analysis required at GCSE. In order to encourage teachers to choose these texts, they selected ones written by familiar authors already popular on the curriculum, such as Malorie Blackman or Benjamin Zephaniah, or with the context of Victorian England already familiar from 19th century novel study in *The Empress*. The team also made sure they were not choosing texts with exclusionary themes, or repeated swearing. The books also had to be varied in the stories they told: Pearson Edexcel did not want writers of colour represented as a singular ‘urban’

experience. Getting students to read the texts and give their opinions provided an unexpected bonus: student feedback was that because there were not hurdles in the narrative to their understanding, they were able to engage more deeply in the analysis of structure and language. Pearson Edexcel also wanted to ensure there were sufficient resources, in terms of training events, schemes of work and student-facing content to support teachers and schools choosing the texts. Going one step further this year in partnership with Penguin, the Lit in Colour Pioneers programme has been launched. The programme has recruited 134 schools and provides copies of their chosen set text as well as training and development in teaching that text. By sponsoring a substantial number of schools to engage, the programme hopes to create the critical mass in terms of resources and support that more teachers need to teach the texts by authors of colour. The Lit in Colour Pioneers programme removes the barriers of cost and lack of expertise, both identified in the research report, and creates a community dedicated to teaching exciting new set texts by authors of colour.



## Overview of the current state of the Curriculum

**C**oncerns about diversity in the curriculum are not new; discussions about increasing representation of Black authors in the curriculum in particular have been ongoing for decades (notably in Dabydeen & Wilson-Tagoe, 1987; an account is given in Somner, 2011). However, in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 it feels like there is a more widespread appetite for change, and changes are beginning to happen to the curriculum, as suggested by the survey respondents and discussed in more detail in the case studies. Much of what has been done is tokenistic, including only one or two short texts (according to interviewees and survey) and now is the time to integrate diverse texts across the curriculum so that diversity is not, in the words of one secondary survey respondent ‘a box ticking exercise’. Rather than including texts by Black authors only in Black History Month, they can be deeply embedded in the curriculum. Poetry and extracts from speeches or longer texts dominate the texts which are taught across the age ranges in secondary school; there is more focus on fiction texts in primary. 51.7% of the young people surveyed

agreed that “the English Literature curriculum doesn’t reflect the diversity of British society today.”

*“We want our students’ lived experience to be recognisable in the books they read in school. We want them to see themselves as everyday protagonists, not just as BAME protagonists resolving just BAME issues.”*  
(Greig City Academy)

Interviewees and survey respondents also felt that changes in the publishing industry were happening, but that they were not necessarily representing a broad range of experiences, or moving away from cliché. There are beginning to be more picture books where the main character just ‘happens to be black’ (primary deputy head), embedding more representation across the narrative spectrum as opposed to being focused on race as the key aspect of Black, Asian or minority ethnic characters’ lives.

One of the aims of the National Curriculum for English is to ensure young people “develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information” (DfE, 2013, p. 2). 37.7% of young people surveyed agreed that “The books I study at school / college put me off reading”. 41.2% of them had not read a single book for pleasure in the last 12 months. There is an urgent need to find ways to reengage young people with reading, particularly as the youth survey suggested that as students get older, they are less engaged with reading for pleasure (54.7% agreed that they were keen readers when younger, but less so now).





# Barriers and solutions

"This is something not discussed enough: literature is the way that we can move **FORWARD** in our communities."

- Harton Technology College

## The racial profile of the English teaching profession

The most recent data on the racial profile of the teaching profession in England shows that in 2019 85.7% of teachers were White British, with a further 3.8% White Other, and that 92.7% of headteachers were White British (DfE, 2021). Only 65.4% of pupils are White British (Tereschenko et al., 2020). Further, 46% of schools in England have no Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers (Tereschenko et al., 2020). Retention within the profession is lower for Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers (Allen et al., 2016; DfE 2018c). There is no accessible data on the racial profile of teachers within individual subjects. Two of the teacher educators interviewed for this report said that they found it hard to recruit Black, Asian or minority ethnic trainees for their English teacher training courses because of the very White demographics of their surrounding areas.

Of the 230 survey respondents who answered the question and received their education in the UK, 74.3% (n=168) had never been taught English by a person of colour. This rises to 87.8% (n=202) if we exclude university experiences.

We are not arguing that Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers have better knowledge of racially diverse texts and authors, but that a lack of racial diversity within subject teachers contributes to positioning English as a 'White subject' which has a knock-on effect on A level and university subject choice, and then entrants to the profession.

Teacher interviewees and survey respondents noted the importance of not leaving racial diversity work to Black colleagues, and also ensuring that it was not the responsibility of one individual within the school either, as this risked concentrating motivation and knowledge in one person who could then leave the school. There is a risk that a little



**46% of schools in England have NO Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers**

“

One of the main themes identified in both the survey and the interviews was teachers' perceptions of their own lack of knowledge preventing them from adding more diverse texts to the curriculum. This fell into two categories: first where to start finding the books and choosing ones which were appropriate for teaching; and secondly the secure **knowledge** of how to **TEACH** them.

”

knowledge will be seen as expertise: one White head of department responding to the survey expressed concern that they were being looked to “as an authority and I am not.”

Among White respondents to the survey one major concern was how to protect students in the classroom who might have experienced racism previously when discussing issues of race. However, there are also issues for Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers when they teach about these issues, particularly in schools in which White pupils and teachers predominate. One experienced Black teacher who taught in a mainly white school where all but two of the staff members were White expressed their desire for “training on how to protect myself when teaching issues of race and conversing with White teachers.” Some Black interviewees expressed similar concerns. The challenges of teaching about race differ not only according to the ethnic make-up of the school but also the personal identity of the teacher (Nelson-Addy, 2021)



## Knowledge

One of the main themes identified in both the survey and the interviews was teachers' perceptions of their own lack of knowledge preventing them from adding more diverse texts to the curriculum. This fell into two categories: first where to start finding the books and choosing ones which were appropriate for teaching; and secondly the secure knowledge of how to teach them.

Ball (1985) noted that the greatest influence upon an English teacher's practice was their own experiences as a pupil whether at school or university, and this appears to still be relevant. Two of the respondents to the survey noted that they were in need of further training on race and empire because it was not something they had been taught at school. Of the 157 secondary teachers 69 had studied Black authors, post-colonial literature or world literature as part of their undergraduate degree and a further five had gained some knowledge of these areas in postgraduate study. The rest had not. One respondent commented:

*“these modules were not compulsory and I did not know enough about them to make an informed choice. As a result of my secondary school education, I believed that I SHOULD be studying Dickens, Shakespeare, Hardy, Austen, the Brontes, etc. I had a narrow view of what English Literature was, and it was overwhelmingly focused on the Canon. I regret not choosing modules that would have broadened by understanding of these issues and given me access to a wider range of writers.”*

A handful of respondents noted that their degrees were not in English even though they now taught English as secondary teachers; it is not uncommon for teachers to teach subjects they do not have degrees in and this returns us again to the cyclical nature of teachers teaching what they were taught. This was also raised by one of the primary interviewees. Joshua Asquith, a Literacy coordinator at a school in Leeds, said:

*“subject knowledge is a huge barrier to instigating change: primary teachers are generalists – there is so much anxiety getting on top of the technicalities of curricular teaching that diversification efforts seem like the ‘cherry on top of the icing of the cake’. I would argue that it's harder for primary than secondary teachers in this regard.”*

This conception of primary teachers as generalists was picked up by another primary interviewee. Primary respondents to the survey, however, were less likely to cite a lack of knowledge as a challenge, although several noted that they would do research before teaching any book, including about authorial background. One noted the predominance of American authors in books about characters of colour; another said that while they found it easy to source excellent texts by Black authors they found it more difficult to find texts from other backgrounds such as South American or Indian. A third respondent said that there was not enough choice of these types of books, which suggests a lack of awareness about their own lack of knowledge.

There was agreement between interviewees and survey respondents that the choice was becoming

better, but that there were challenges in that, for example, picture books with Black characters might have both a White author and a White illustrator. Two primary interviewees noted that it was difficult to find ‘everyday’ narratives featuring characters of colour; books tended to be either about exceptional people or have experiences of racism or ‘struggle’ as their core narrative. Interviewees noted that when the primary curriculum is topic driven, the difficulties of finding diverse books multiply, as teachers start from the topic.

A potential solution for these problems raised by the interviewees was the support of specialists who could advise on which books were suitable for study, and help teachers to gain knowledge and therefore confidence in teaching the books. Several interviewees mentioned specific resources, including bookshops who specialised in diverse books, which enabled them to find the books they wanted to. One primary head noted that there is plenty of guidance available on diverse books on the internet in a variety of places. Another interviewee noted

the danger of the ‘single story’ and the need for teachers to be able to think about what message a single text could convey if it was not contextualised by others: the aim would not be to remove that text, but to consider how to present it to students to ameliorate that effect.

*“By studying Of Mice and Men in Y9 and dealing with the racism suffered by Crooks and not balancing that with positive examples of Black and ethnically diverse characters and writers we may be perpetuating a stereotype.”*  
(Louth Academy)

Farrah Serroukh from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education places emphasis on teachers “understand[ing] how to identify the features of a quality inclusive text and how to mediate the ones that fall short.” She stresses the importance of ensuring a rich reading diet shaped by a breadth and balance of high-quality representative and inclusive titles that encompass a varied spectrum of experiences.

Two primary interviewees noted that it was **difficult** to find ‘everyday’ narratives featuring characters of colour; books tended to be either about exceptional people or have experiences of **RACISM** or ‘struggle’ as their **core narrative**.



44 of the 157 secondary respondents to the survey identified either finding appropriate books, or having the secure knowledge of them required to teach, as their main challenge in teaching a more diverse range of texts. Some were open about the fact that lack of contextual knowledge might prevent them from realising nuance in the text – the ‘unknown unknowns’; one teacher worried about “the chance of reading superficially and getting it wrong, and not necessarily having someone to check with on our staff”. Local expertise was valued; one or two teachers noted that they had knowledge and were keen to diversify the curriculum, but felt that it was therefore being left entirely to them. There was more focus on the required suitability of the texts for literary study among the secondary respondents; there was a sense that finding a text which was outside the normal range of school choices required much more investigation to ensure that it was age appropriate and could support the level of analysis required.

One issue in relation to knowledge is the expectation that the teacher should be an expert, an expectation held by both students and teachers. Respondents to the survey noted the need to amplify voices, and give way to students in the classroom if their lived experience was relevant,

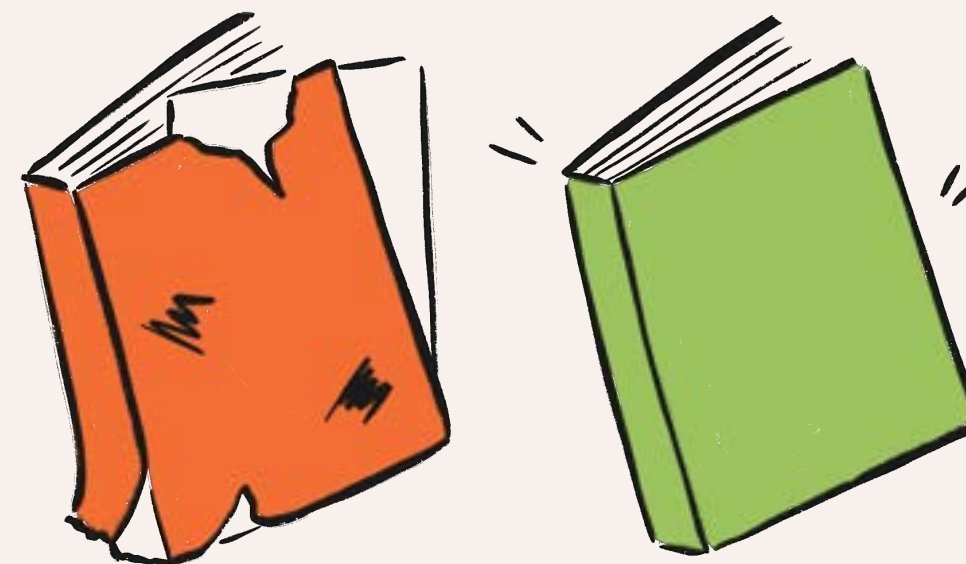
without forcing them to act as ‘spokesperson’. Another teacher described how having to look up more words or references had given them a greater empathy for some of their students: “It makes me realise how non-Christian students must feel when dealing with a predominantly White, Christian curriculum”.

One respondent suggested that new teachers “always opt for safe texts” which affected choices at GCSE; the responses of others, however, suggested that this is not only a problem for new teachers. Another interviewee noted the importance of teachers having the knowledge to be able to recommend texts to students who do not feel represented by the curriculum and who are looking for texts to read to supplement that.

Similar concerns to those expressed by primary teachers were shown by secondary teachers about finding texts which provided an adequate range of representation. One reason given was to avoid implying that “Black, Asian or minority ethnic writers only write about race or race issues”; other respondents considered the feelings of their pupils who might be seeing themselves represented only in terms of narratives of racism.



"One issue in relation to knowledge is the expectation that the teacher should be an **EXPERT**, an expectation held by both students AND teachers."



### Time and resources

Much of the diversity in the curriculum, as shown above, is based on the use of poetry and extracts which have been added into existing schemes of work. One secondary respondent to the survey noted that their department had concentrated recent development work on these types of texts because for longer texts they suffered from the lack of "time to plan and resource their inclusion". Another had said that "sometimes we get given part of an INSET day and told to 'work on diversifying the curriculum' but if people don't know where to start that is unhelpful, and 2 hours here and there isn't enough."

Primary interviewees noted that ready-made resources available from teaching sites were rarely focused on diverse texts, and that this was a challenge when staff sometimes relied on these for the basis of their planning.

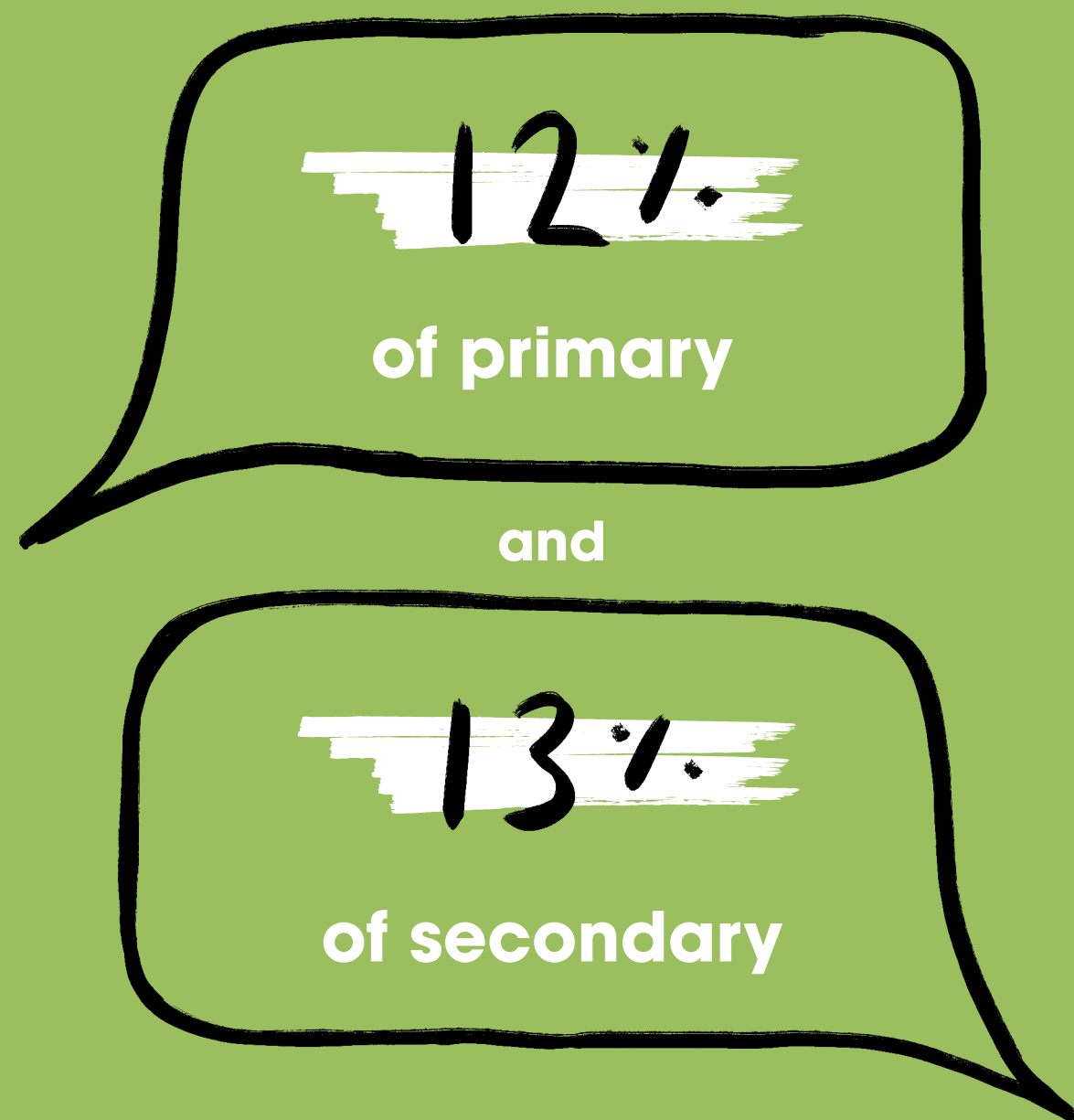
One secondary interviewee, a Vice Principal and former head of English noted that although her school were impressed by the new Pearson Edexcel text choices, they would be unlikely to teach them in the short term because of the lack of resources and support for those texts. She argued that schools choose texts that other schools choose, so that they can guarantee plentiful resources shared online: "you can get a robust quiz on *An Inspector Calls* in two minutes." This lack of resources was also noted as a

key issue by staff and students at Bishop Grosseteste University, as seen in the case study on page 46.

This was echoed by 12 of the secondary respondents who noted the lack of pre-existing resources as the greatest challenge for them in diversifying their texts. One said "it's so easy to teach *An Inspector Calls* and William Wordsworth's poetry because there's a wealth of revision activities, lessons etc so it makes it easy for teachers to support their pupils." This suggests it is not only about resources for the teacher at secondary level, but also about pupil-targeted resources; another respondent suggested that schools were put off texts where there were not plentiful revision activities available.

A further eight secondary and two primary respondents as well as several interviewees suggested that money was the main barrier to change, particularly the cost of whole class sets of new novels. This might also have other consequences as one secondary respondent noted: "This means we are limited to using short texts, poems, articles, and I worry about the message this sends about where we place value".

Members of organisations who supported teachers, such as Awarding Bodies, publishers, and charities who were interviewed agreed that providing teachers with high quality resources was a key way of promoting change.



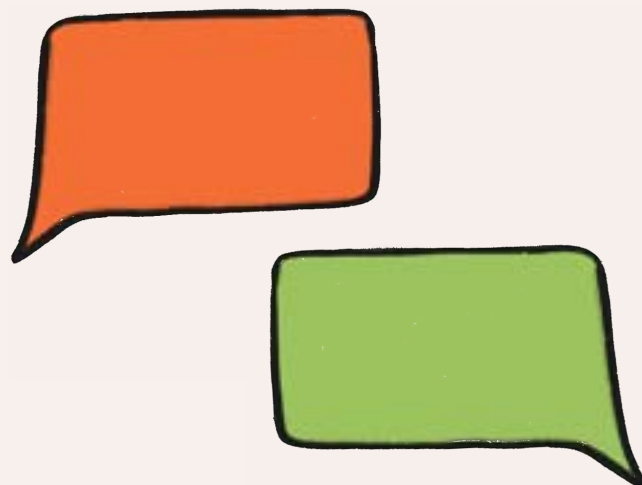
**respondents to the survey reported having had training on how to talk about race as part of their initial teacher training course.**

### Confidence

Approximately 12% of secondary and 13% of primary respondents to the survey reported having had training on how to talk about race as part of their initial teacher training course. However, only two out of the 163 secondary teachers who responded to this question had had continuing professional development on this topic, compared to 14 – or around 20% – of primary respondents. More than half of primary respondents reported reading around on how to teach issues of race or empire (n=42 out of 70 responses, 56.7%); a larger proportion of secondary teachers reported doing this (n= 122 out of 162 respondents, 71.3%). 45 of the primary respondents said that they would welcome further training or support in teaching issues relating to race or empire; particularly mentioned were the desire for resources, training on how to discuss these matters with sensitivity in the classroom, and support in embedding it across the curriculum, rather than teaching race explicitly and separately. 128 of the secondary respondents wanted further training or support in teaching these issues; they were particularly interested in support for approaching racist language in books, ways to avoid action becoming tokenistic, ways to incorporate knowledge of race and empire into teaching older texts, and resources. Two teachers mentioned anxieties about how to avoid accusations that they hated Britain in teaching about empire.



Nevertheless, when asked directly, teachers reported feeling comfortable talking about issues of race and migration. Of 75 primary respondents, 70 were comfortable talking about issues of race and colour in the classroom (93.3%); on the same question on issues of migration 68 of 73 primary respondents were comfortable (91.9%). A smaller majority reported that their students were comfortable talking about these issues as well (55 out of 74 respondents (74.3%) for race and colour and 50 out of 67 respondents (68.5%) for migration). Primary school teachers were more likely to say that issues of empire were not relevant for their students.



Of 161 secondary respondents who answered, 152 were comfortable talking about issues of race and colour in the classroom (93.8%); on the same question on issues of migration, 153 out of 162 secondary respondents were comfortable (94.5%). A smaller but still overwhelming majority of 137 out of 162 secondary respondents were comfortable talking about issues of empire in the classroom (84.5%). As with primary a smaller majority reported that their students were comfortable talking about these issues (101 out of 161 respondents (62.7%) for race and colour; 102 out of 151 respondents (63.4%) for migration, and a smaller number for empire – 83 out of 162 (51.2%)). Conner Brown, a secondary teacher interviewee, noted having had to teach “it’s not racist to talk about race” and that students did not always have the language to be confident talking about these issues.

As shown above, poetry is strongly associated with Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors in the curriculum. This gives a particular view of what authors of colour write. Rogers (2015) wrote about the framing that the ‘Poetry from Other Cultures’ label created for reading international and British poets of colour, largely in terms of migration and language difficulties. In addition, as Dr John Gordon of UEA pointed out in interview, research shows that English teachers are often not confident with teaching poetry and when put together with not being comfortable about talking about race, the difficulties compound.

One concern expressed by several respondents to the survey was not being confident to talk about racism in classes where their pupils might have had personal experience, for fear of overstepping or offending. Anti-racist education puts a strong emphasis on giving authority to the lived experience of those who have experienced racism, and it is important to offer pupils the opportunity to speak and to believe them when they do. On the other hand, it is also important not to treat individual pupils as ambassadors for the racial group to which they belong, and not to demand that they educate you and your students, as several survey respondents also identified. The balance is evidently a difficult one to maintain.

Interviewees agreed on the importance of having these conversations. Dr Sheine Peart, a collaborator with the Initial Teacher Education team at Bishop Grosseteste University, argued the

*“huge damage that ignorance does if that cycle is never broken into – I am a great advocate of allies so the history of the [n] word needs to be explored in classroom – we have to ask people to do that explanation in the classroom who are not black even if they are not comfortable talking about it – if we don’t have difficult and challenging conversations we are just replicating ourselves and we don’t learn and change.”*

One interviewee, the CEO of an Academy Trust, noted that a lack of personal experience was also a

barrier for school leaders in leading change; in his largely monoethnic trust he had neither the personal experience to feel confident “taking the conversation forward” nor did he have diverse staff whose expertise he might draw on, nor had he been able to recruit diverse school governors.

## Language and race

A specific challenge for teachers in secondary school is the use of the n-word in certain novels, including *Of Mice and Men* and *Anita and Me*. 122 of the 157 secondary respondents to the survey reported that they teach one of these novels or another novel which features the n-word (78%). There are almost as many positions on the topic as there were respondents; almost all teachers said that they pre-warned students and had an explicit discussion around the word. Several mentioned that they had changed their practice because of challenges from students, which Mohamud (2020) suggests arise because of students’ increased knowledge and awareness. There was at least one well publicised case in 2020 where students complained to their teacher about the fact that the word had been read out in full during a lesson, and were told by the teacher that it was entirely

legitimate for her to do so. The eventual consequence was that the class were given a different teacher because she had felt intimidated by their complaint. One respondent to the survey noted that *Of Mice and Men* had been dropped from the curriculum when students had revealed how uncomfortable the racist language made them; others noted that although they no longer taught the text it was important to explore the history of the word and discuss why it should not be used. Some of those who retained it stressed the historical context and that Steinbeck uses the word deliberately to shock (which is a debatable interpretation). Several respondents reported consulting students, particularly those of Black heritage, as to what they would prefer to be done; some of these consultations led to the word being omitted, and some to its being read out in the context of the text to create ‘awareness’.

One of the trainee teachers at Bishops Grosseteste University during an interview drew on parallels with her own lesbian identity to say ‘it’s not my word to reclaim’, as an explanation of why she would never say it in class. White respondents to the survey were evidently thinking more carefully about the word now than they had in the past.





## CASE STUDY

# Bishop Grosseteste University – Training Teachers To Teach Diverse Texts

**B**ishop Grosseteste University (BGU) has made a significant effort to promote diversity in their PGCE modules over the last few years. They have established a campus-wide ‘safe space’ network of staff that supports educators discussing the long-standing corrosive effects of inequality in contemporary society by sharing education resources through the BGU Library. Recognising that they have a largely White catchment, and serve largely White schools, nevertheless the University, and the PGCE programme in particular have focused on equality, diversity and inclusion, including an EDI week on the course, led by Lyndsay Muir. Ranging from an English curriculum session by Clare Lawrence, English PGCE tutor, on *Of Mice and Men*, explicitly focusing on the racist language in the novel, to an intensive project developing resources on diverse texts, BGU students engage with diversity in the curriculum from the off. Sheine Peart, Reader in Access Equality and Inclusion at BGU, instigated a PGCE course wide project, including primary trainees and all secondary subjects – to develop resources that could be shared with schools. Harriet Tricker, Adam Burton, Sam McDonald, Molly Ambler, all students on the PGCE English course, collaborated to

develop a set of three lessons based around a poem by Jackie Kay for use with Key Stage 3. The poem ‘In My Country’ looks at identity and the experience of being asked where you come from when you are in your home country. The lessons they reported from being involved focused on the need to escape the idea of creating a one off lesson, by picking something which integrates into the national curriculum and covers what needs to be taught but also is inclusive, making sure they “represent the richness of human life” as Harriet put it. The lessons were tried and tested in the classroom, with a focus on the analysis of language and responding creatively to the text. Hadiza Abdulrahman, Clare Lawrence and Sheine Peart conducted an evaluation of the resource development project that showed that students who had taken part felt a much greater confidence in developing their own material on diverse topics. They reported being empowered to go out and teach about race and racism, instead of wondering if it was their place to engage with it.

## Pushback and structural barriers

A small number of interviewees and respondents to the survey mentioned that they had received pushback when attempting to introduce more diverse texts into their curriculum, sometimes from their fellow teachers, sometimes from the senior management team, and sometimes from students or their parents. This largely relates to two arguments: that diverse literature is not relevant to White students; and that literature teaching should relate only to canonical texts with high cultural capital.

19<sup>th</sup> century canonical texts have a strong place in the English curriculum in England currently. We are not arguing for their removal. Part of the context in which those novels were written is the heyday of the British Empire and a truly in-depth knowledge of those novels incorporates that context and the way that it affects the text and its interpretation. For example, Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* is racialised as Other, which is an important part of his characterisation and the way that others react to him. As an orphan from Liverpool, he might be Black, Mixed Race or Irish, all of which were racialised as Other in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This context is important to explore for a thorough knowledge of the text. From *Jane Eyre*’s mixed race Bertha Mason and Jane’s potential Indian mission, to *Great Expectations*’ dependence on transportation and the opportunities for wealth provided by settler colonialism, to the racist depictions of people of colour in *The Sign of Four*, understandings of race, racism, and the British Empire are key to better knowledge of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British novel.

*“Urgent and essential efforts to decolonise curriculums might have a better chance of succeeding if they changed their language, if campaigners talked about widening curriculums rather than decolonizing them: for that is what decolonizing involves. It is entirely possible to teach the canon and also give students a sense of what sits outside it, to teach the extraordinary and prizewinning works of Naipaul, Ishiguro and Zadie Smith, for example, alongside those of Dickens and Joyce.”*

**Sathnam Sanghera, Empireland (2021, p. 216)**



"URGENT and essential efforts to decolonise curriculums might have a better chance of succeeding if they ~~CHANGED~~ their language, if campaigners talked about widening curriculums rather than decolonizing them: for that is what decolonizing involves. It is entirely possible to teach the canon AND also give students a sense of what sits outside it, to teach the extraordinary and prize-winning works of Naipaul, Ishiguro and Zadie Smith, for example, ~~ALONGSIDE~~ those of Dickens and Joyce."

Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland*



One of the primary respondents to the survey noted one challenge for them was that their students saw books by Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors or featuring Black, Asian or minority ethnic characters “as a novelty, and therefore not taking them seriously”. Another noted their senior management team had an emphasis on “children’s classics”, which biases the curriculum towards White authors. A Black secondary respondent noted that when they challenged the language of “the greatest writers” being used to direct a mainly canonical curriculum she was met with awkwardness. Their head of department also became defensive when they challenged the exclusive use of White authors to deal with issues of race and ethnic identity. Six secondary respondents noted that the pandemic had either interrupted changes to the curriculum or been used as a reason by leadership to justify why changes could not be made.

*“It’s really important to have book by non-White people in the classroom. These texts are what everyone should know, what it means to be a British person. Eliminating a whole range of voices can eliminate them from sharing at a really early stage and gives the impression that what everyone needs to read or what is essential is by the certain authors with a certain key viewpoint. And this is just false.”*  
Edward, 18



English Literature teaching is not only about canonical texts even in secondary school. It also incorporates the best of modern literature. Britain’s only living Nobel laureate in Literature is Kazuo Ishiguro. Some of the best literature being produced in Britain today is by writers of colour. Academic works like the *Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (Nasta and Stein, 2020) and Initiatives such as the reprinting of select Black British novels by Penguin, curated by Bernardine Evaristo, are bringing back to the public eye excellent works which have undeservedly dropped out of consideration for the ‘canon’.

The relevance of diverse literature to White students should be self-evident. One English teacher in training, who had grown up in almost exclusively White environment was passionate about the benefits of a diverse curriculum: “I know how much I get from reading texts by diverse authors – how awful to just cut off so much literature and so much richness that you could access just because you’re White and it doesn’t apply to you just because it was written by a Black person.” Only 27.2% of White young people surveyed agreed that “the books we study in English Literature helped me learn more about my heritage”, which was only marginally more than the level of agreement from Black, Asian or minority ethnic young people (24.8%).

*“You cannot connect to a life you haven’t experienced, to a life you haven’t lived. You will only know your own life, but as times are changing in modern society you need that [different perspectives on life].”*  
Nehaal, 16

*“The demographic of our students and local community is almost exclusively white British, resulting in a lack of knowledge and understanding of anybody from minority ethnic backgrounds. The limits of our students’ world is the end of the village. A result of this is a sense of apathy and lack of importance placed on education and academic achievement. Until now, we have delivered the AQA specification of English Literature at GCSE and I feel that the texts delivered have only served to further alienate our students from the study of English and strengthened their belief that it is of little relevance to them and their lives, due to the age of the texts and the ethnicities of their writers.”*  
Lincoln School

**A Black secondary respondent noted that when they challenged the language of ‘the greatest writers’ being used to direct a mainly canonical curriculum she was met with awkwardness. Their head of department also became defensive when they challenged the *exclusive* use of White authors to deal with issues of race and ethnic identity.**



“

**“The demographic of our students and local community is almost exclusively white British, resulting in a lack of knowledge and understanding of anybody from minority ethnic backgrounds. The limits of our students’ world is the end of the village. The texts delivered have only served to further ~~ALIENATE~~ our students from the study of English and strengthened their belief that it is of little relevance to them and their lives, due to the age of the texts and the ethnicities of their writers.”**

**- Lincoln School**

”

Elliott (2020) argued for the ability of literature to provide a range of prototypes for our understanding of each other, in reference to Claudia Rankine’s ‘because white men can’t/ police their imagination/ black men are dying’ (2014, p. 135). English literature as a subject develops empathy (Djikic, Oatley and Moldoveanu, 2013) and offers readers experiences of other lives. Clara White, an English Lead and Assistant Manager at a SCITT (School Centred Initial Teacher Training), suggested that English teachers are drawn to thinking about how the world is represented and connected with, making diverse texts a natural fit. Donna Boam, Assistant Vice Principal and formerly a Head of English, said she felt “there is a strong moral imperative in English to explore opinions and empathy – it is the only subject where students are asked to step into someone else’s shoes and identify with their emotions.” The young people themselves felt strongly the relevance of a diverse curriculum.

*“the knowledge I gain from [reading] will help me to understand others’ viewpoints and their culture.”*

*Tianna, 15*

*“I think it helps people understand societies and themselves better. The questions of identity it raises are of extreme importance. Studying others is key to studying yourselves and literature is all about the representation of things.”*

*Edward, 18*

*“Reading allows me the opportunity to expand my horizons and indulge in a reality alternate to mine. I haven’t always read as extensively as I do now and have only picked up reading properly since the first lockdown. Reading helps keep me present and it’s a plus because I’m always learning new things! I truly believe that reading gives you a foundation of knowledge that is incomparable to those who do not read.”*

*Jasmine, 18*



"There is a strong moral imperative in English to EXPLORE opinions and empathy - it is the ONLY subject where students are asked to step into someone else's shoes and identify with their **EMOTIONS**"

Donna Boam, Assistant Vice Principal



Some teachers responding to the survey mentioned that while they had attempted to push for change in their school they had received pushback from the senior management of their school; one characterised their (primary) headteacher as “very defensive” and adopting an ‘All Lives Matter’ position. Another noted that while their school was happy to teach “tales of non-violent Black protest during Black History Month so long as it is Rosa Parks protesting in the US decades ago. Not BLM protesting in the 21st century, in the UK!”

Another form of pushback encountered is a focus on the underachievement of White Working Class Boys; the use of ‘White’ here obfuscates the class (socioeconomic) component which contributes to this, and attempts to separate the working classes, of whom many are Black and Asian. While 60% of White people consider themselves to be ‘working

class’ only 12% of White children claim free school meals (Bhopal, 2021), which is one of the indicators used for the analyses of achievement. Black and Asian school children are proportionately more likely to be eligible for free school meals (Bhopal, 2020). A report from the Runnymede Trust and the Centre for Labour and Social Studies demonstrated significant overlap between the experiences of White and Black, Asian or minority ethnic working class communities (Snoussi & Montpelat, 2019); it is a false dichotomy to divide the groups. Karan Kaur, the Birmingham school librarian we interviewed, suggested there are more commonalities than there are differences between these communities as shown by their reading tastes. Nikesh Shukla’s *The Boxer* was instantly popular with boys of all ethnicities in her school because it reflected an activity in which they were interested. A more diverse curriculum has the power to address these concerns as well.

*“As an Academy serving a community based in one of the most deprived areas of the country, it is our responsibility to remove any barrier to access, progress, participation, achievement and attainment. We exist to address inequality so that all students are equipped to make the choice to: go to university, choose their career and improve the world so that we make a positive contribution to society.”*

*(City Academy Bristol)*

Analyses of achievement at 16 show that White British, Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean students from low SES backgrounds achieve the lowest of all groups, slightly more pronounced for boys than girls (Strand, 2021). Other low SES groups also perform below average, but higher than these three. Low SES students from all ethnicities have more in common than separating them. When students have high SES backgrounds, boys from Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean backgrounds score lower than White British boys.

A further issue for schools is performativity requirements. One interviewee, the Vice Principal who used to be a Head of English, suggested that remaining with traditional texts also “maintains some form of data ‘control’ in terms of GCSE grades awarded”. She noted “fears that students shifting to

newer, less tried and tested texts will not be consistently graded and schools do not want to make a curriculum/text decision that might affect GCSE success grades.” A survey respondent suggested that some of the available diverse texts at GCSE did not provide sufficient challenge for the highest attaining students. The CEO of the Academy Trust who was interviewed suggested diversification of the curriculum might work best as part of a larger national conversation about what is taught and how schools are held accountable.



## First steps

One primary school headteacher from Birmingham emphasised that change has to come from the top: diversification of the curriculum needs to be laid out as a priority by the senior leadership team. He recommended devoting two or three days of CPD at the beginning of the year to training. For mainly White schools he suggested beginning by broadening the view of what ‘British’ history was, to break down divisions between Black and White and then drip-feeding diverse texts into the curriculum to support that. The CEO of the Academy Trust suggested that leaders needed to seek informed conversations with experts on race and diversity. More than one interviewee recommended the Letterbox Library, an online curated bookshop which can provide ‘library packs’ of books with diverse authors and characters.

Anna Foster, a secondary English teacher educator, suggested that initial teacher education partnerships offer a potential hosting space for teachers to work away from their own school cultures to explore issues related to diversifying the curriculum or building confidence. Another teacher educator suggested that case studies of how teacher training programmes were successfully working with trainees on topics of race and diversity would be helpful to enable others to do the same.



## CASE STUDY

## Bola Ayonrinde - Leading Change in primary settings

**M**s Bola Ayonrinde is a Deputy Head in a primary school in East Sussex and has contributed to the Race Equality Guidance for East Sussex. She is passionate about diversity in children's literature and views it as an entry point to discussing various social topics and experiences with young people. Ayonrinde believes teachers and senior leaders should embed cultural and racial diversity into lessons and school culture. By doing this, we avoid limiting engagement with diverse races and cultures to events such as Black History Month. According to Ayonrinde, this effort to immerse the pupils in various cultures throughout the school day is both a development from the tokenistic representation of notable people of colour over a short period and more representative of our world. She notes that schools need to be mindful not to present Black History as though it started at the point of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, but instead to teach about pre-colonial African kingdoms, such as the kingdom of Benin. Teachers should not only celebrate notable Black athletes and musicians but also look at the breadth of contributions Black people have made to various fields: Maths, Literature, Physics etc. Finally, she argued that libraries across the country should engage with this change. Following her active effort to widen the diversity of books in her school library, she has noticed how

much more interested her pupils are in reading a wider variety of books.

Ayonrinde acknowledges that her ability to make school-wide changes, and do so more easily, is a result of being a part of the senior leadership team. Additionally, she finds working alongside other leaders and staff who show a keen interest and commitment to making a change within the curriculum and across the school very beneficial. Ayonrinde has always been the only person of colour on her staff team since she started teaching, and while she enjoys leading the change in her school and county, she warned against the expectation that teachers of colour be the sole 'right' person to lead this change within schools. She urges all teachers to be proactive in the pursuit for a more ethnically, culturally and racially diverse classroom and school culture. Among the factors in her success in encouraging engagement with racial equality in schools are: her active effort to seek out and make diverse books available within her school; using tried and tested methods, that arise from her academic and personal study and encouraging teachers to come and observe them in action; her effort to present her suggestions for change in a personable, manageable and accessible way; and her hint towards keeping the teachers (and the teachers keeping each other) accountable.

## CASE STUDY

## Joy Mbakwe - Embedding anti-racism in secondary settings

**J**oy Mbakwe is Head of English at a secondary school in South London. The school serves a majority Black British, Black African, Black Caribbean and Mixed Heritage pupil population. There is school-wide support to teach anti-racism through the curriculum and this support is reinforced by the school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Mbakwe stressed the importance of SLT support in propelling many of the classroom efforts to broaden the curriculum at the school. She uses the language of 'broadening' the English curriculum within a general school-wide framework of anti-racism. The school engages all staff — not just teaching staff — in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on anti racism and sets summer reading for staff to continue their learning outside of the CPD training. Examples of authors that the school has recommended for staff summer reading have included: Afua Hirsch, Akala and Reni Eddo-Lodge. There are opportunities at the start of the succeeding school year for staff to follow-up and share what they have learned from the texts over the summer.

For Mbakwe, diversification work is not just about the books that their pupils are exposed to: diversification

also relates to how pupils are taught to express themselves in the classroom. She does not penalise her pupils for using slang in the classroom. Mbakwe suggests that, as a consequence, her pupils feel comfortable with sharing their thoughts about the texts that they read in the classroom. She also mentioned that she negotiates and has discussions with her students in order to incorporate their thoughts into setting texts for curricular reading. All of the books that pupils read for tutor time are by Black authors; the same applies for the books that the school recommends to their pupils to read at home. Mbakwe uses this mechanism as a basis to assess which books to include as set texts for curricular study according to what is being read, enjoyed and talked about by the pupils.

Mbakwe believes that there is still some way to go with establishing a robust anti-racist framework for all aspects of schooling at her institution. In the future, she plans to incorporate diversification and anti-racism frameworks into staff Performance Management within her English department. She also plans to gauge the diversification efforts of the current exam board to see if their choice of texts and curricular ethos are aligned with those of her department.

# Conclusion

**L**iterary canons are a matter of social reproduction (Guillory, 1993), which is to say texts get taught because they have been taught. What we can see in the data reported here is that this results in historically underrepresented groups continuing to be underrepresented. There are a greater number of Black poets published relative to Black novelists and playwrights; this is partly because spoken word poetry has offered a literary and creative outlet outside of societal gatekeepers, and partly because the stakes involved in publishing poetry pamphlets are lower than for novels and therefore publishers have been more likely to take a chance. The combination of social reproduction of canon and a greater range of representation in poetry means that without concerted effort, poetry will remain the 'home' of diverse writers on the curriculum, and as a result Black, Asian or minority ethnic writers will see poetry as their viable outlet, creating a vicious circle. The reproduction of 'what I was taught' or 'what we have always taught' is particularly prevalent in terms of teachers without specialist training, or teachers who do not have experience of a wider selection of texts themselves. A lack of resources and time, as well as knowledge, prevents teachers stepping outside the palette of writers they already teach.

There is systematic underrepresentation of writers of colour in our curriculum, relative to both to their place in contemporary British literary excellence and compared to the demographics of the English school population. Some children will never study a text by a writer of colour apart from a handful of poems as part of their GCSE English Literature. Young people themselves value a diverse literary diet. School libraries play a central role in providing a wide range of extra-curricular reading.

There is a certain level of comfort, also, with racism being historically or geographically distant, rather than contemporary and in the here and now. Race and racism is largely represented by American texts, or by 'other cultures' poetry which focuses on migration and language. For change to happen, there are barriers to overcome, but there are also solutions to those challenges. There has been a clear increase in the momentum towards a more diverse literary curriculum over the last year and there is an opportunity to be seized. We conclude with a set of recommendations for anyone who wants to help realise the ambitions of Lit in Colour.

Literary canons are a matter of *social reproduction* (Guillory, 1993), which is to say texts get taught because they have been taught.

# Recommendations



## For research and data

- ✓ The government should collect and publish data on the ethnicity of teachers training by subject.
- ✓ There is an urgent need to examine the effect of a racially diverse English curriculum for students, in terms of a range of outcomes.
- ✓ The proportion of students choosing each text at GCSE should be reported as standard for each examination.

## For school leadership

- ✓ Create a policy on how to support students and teachers of colour around race and racism and in the context of discussions of these in the classroom. This should not include banning discussions of these sensitive but crucial issues.
- ✓ Invest in whole staff training around anti-racism, using the expertise of outside organisations. Do not depend on the labour of a few teachers of colour.
- ✓ Provide support for diversification of the curriculum in terms of: planning time; financial resources to buy books; readiness to speak with parents.







## For teachers

- ✓ Conduct an audit of what texts are in your curriculum and your classrooms as a starting point for working forward.
- ✓ Ensure a variety of narratives is represented: not just trauma, not just Black exceptionalism, not just American and not just historical.
- ✓ Do not limit Black, Asian or minority ethnic voices to poetry and extracts.
- ✓ Pre 1900 texts are deeply entwined with issues of race and empire, and teaching these aspects provides a better knowledge of the text.
- ✓ Poetry is an excellent way to bring in Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors, but one poem is not a diverse curriculum.
- ✓ Come to terms with the challenges of being a White ally. Practice talking about race openly and rehearsing what to say if a child uses a racist epithet. Model not having all the answers but being open to talking about race and racism.
- ✓ Discuss the importance of exploring race and diverse texts with parents of White children and how your school approaches this.
- ✓ Create reading groups for new diverse novels to develop knowledge and schemes of work in supportive groups.
- ✓ Primary: Think about the message conveyed by the texts you already use: does that message need mediating (e.g. stereotypes about Africa in picture books)?
- ✓ Secondary: Table a discussion at a department meeting of the findings of this report and discuss the implications for your department.
- ✓ Secondary: Consider changing examination set texts.
- ✓ Secondary: A level Non-Examined Assessment texts are a good place to introduce novels by Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors.
- ✓ Secondary: Race and racism are equally a part of texts written by White authors: consider the White gaze of literature and what is omitted as well as what is present.

## For parents

- ✓ Show support for your school teaching diverse texts.
- ✓ Take a look at your own child's bookshelves to see how many books you have by Black, Asian or minority ethnic writers. If you have a younger child, look at how many of their books feature a main character who is not white? Have this front of mind when you next buy books or borrow from your local library.
- ✓ Talk to your children about race and what is and is not appropriate.

## For resource producers, publishers and Awarding Bodies

- ✓ Increase the support for the teaching of diverse texts at all ages.
- ✓ Provide exemplar material including for the highest grades which draw on diverse texts.
- ✓ Signpost resources which exist clearly.
- ✓ Ensure diverse voices are integrated throughout all resources and publications.

## For teacher educators and CPD providers

- ✓ Strengthen the pipeline of Black English teachers. Target recruitment events at Black students, including those whose degrees are in related subjects to English.
- ✓ Ensure that there is specific training provided on how to talk about race and racism with pupils as part of initial teacher education.
- ✓ Ensure that texts by Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors are well represented within teacher training courses, to counter point the likely prior experiences of the cohort.
- ✓ Training must take account of and provide for the varying experiences and needs of Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers and students and White teachers and students.





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