

Statement in response to the current debates surrounding the inclusivity of subjects such as English in secondary schools.

The English Department at Lancaster Girls' Grammar School fully support the peaceful protests of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and we unequivocally recognise the invaluable contributions of BAME groups, not just within our school community, but to the entire country.

As an academic subject English holds a rather unique position in that it is concerned with the past, exploring our vast cultural and literary heritage; the present, as students apply their modern thinking and experiences to texts, some of which were written almost a thousand years ago; and, of course, the future. As written in our curriculum statement, one of the main aims of our English programmes of study is to ensure that the young people entrusted into our care leave their compulsory English studies at the end of KS4 with a greater understanding of their own identity. That way, they will head into the next stage of their education as independent, critical thinkers with the confidence and maturity to voice their opinion on any given subject matter whilst exhibiting the sensitive social awareness that their views may differ from others.

The events of the past few weeks have provoked much debate and discussion on a whole series of issues related to race and equality. School curriculums have - justifiably – come under scrutiny. Reflecting on our English provision at LGGGS came down to a fundamental question: is our English curriculum sufficiently diverse in catering for the increasing number of BAME groups within our school community?

The simple, honest answer is no. Whilst there are parts of our curriculum where our students explore the work of writers from different literary and artistic cultures (listed below) there is more that we could do; there is much more that we *should* do; there is a wealth of literary fiction and non-fiction written by BAME groups that we *can* introduce into our curriculum – especially at KS3 where we do not prescriptively follow an exam board specification. From September 2020 it is our intention to:

- Give novels written by BAME authors increased status and prominence within our reading for pleasure schemes with years 7, 8 and 9. All students have already been provided with a suggested list of recommended reading and we aim to encourage them to share their experiences of what they have read with their peers and staff during class discussion of wider reading.
- Novels such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give* (2017) have proven very popular and it is our sincere hope that many more will be discovered, recommended and celebrated by our students. It is our hope that these recommendations can be included in the weekly pupil bulletin, as they have been previously.
- Add Sharna Jackson's *High-Rise Mystery* (2019) to our range of novels featuring strong female protagonists read with year 7 in the Autumn Term.
- Make Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* (2001) a key text in year 8's Autumn Term thematic study of dystopian fiction.
- Expand the number of historical fiction options for year 8 in the Summer Term to include at least one following – *How High the Moon* (2019) by Karyn Parsons, *Yankee Girl* (2005) by Mary Ann Rodman or possibly Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)
- We also intend to incorporate the CILIP Carnegie 2019 winner, *The Poet X* (2018) by Elizabeth Acevedo, into our year 8 poetry scheme, titled People and Places.
- Our year 9 curriculum is strongly influenced by the current AQA specifications in English Language and English Literature. Arguably no text better encapsulates the lack of equal representation within the British education system than John Agard's 'Checking Out Me History' – included in AQA's Power and Conflict cluster of poems for prescribed study. A small number of GCSE students studied this cluster in preparation for the cancelled 2020 exam

series and now seems a particularly apt time to discuss as a department whether more of the current year 9 cohort should take up this option.

- Ensure that during a key stage's study of a Shakespeare text, students are given the opportunity to see versions and adaptations starring BAME actors. We have recently purchased the RSC's DVD recordings of *Romeo and Juliet* (2018) featuring Bally Gill as Romeo, and *Hamlet* (2016), with Pappa Essiedu as the eponymous prince.

The second exam in our current A-Level Literature course (OCR's H472) is based around a thematic study of Gothic Literature. Whilst this may not seem the most obvious genre to feature texts by BAME authors, our students encounter both Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching* (2008). One of the texts we have as a non-exam assessment option is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's harrowing portrayal of postcolonial Nigeria in *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). The xenophobic prejudices of 19th century Imperial Britain is also one of several critical perspectives applied to *Dracula* (1897) and our students are made aware of the oppression inflicted upon its colonies in their study of Christina Rossetti's 'In the Round Tower at Jhansi' – based upon the unsuccessful Indian Rebellion of 1857.

Of course, secondary school English is not just about literary texts. The English Language is ubiquitous, spoken by an estimated 1.5 billion people across the world and its lexicon is comprised of thousands of words from myriad countries and cultures. Each has its own origin, and each adds something different. All languages must evolve over time – they are a record and a representation of the people who speak them and the countries from where they originate. As such languages also offer a reflection or a snapshot of any culture or country, at any point in its history, for good or ill. To state that the English Language – and English as a subject – has always been inclusive to all ethnicities is simply not true. As would be insisting that steps to remedy this lack of inclusivity have not been taken.

The evolution of the English Language is a key component of our current A-Level course (AQA 7702), and Language and Ethnicity is one of the distinct topics taught in relation to this concept. It is heartening to listen to our students extol the value of language diversity within their lessons, and to acknowledge that in 21st century Britain, each different version of British English we encounter in our day-to-day lives, whether it be a northern dialect, such as Lancastrian, Black British English (BBE) or Asian English, is a quintessential part of society. The influence of all three dialects, along with countless others, has led to the rise of Multicultural Urban British English (MUBE) – hailed by many linguists as the language of modern Britain. It is our sincere hope that the changes we are proposing above will better reflect the multiculturalism within our school community – itself a microcosm of 21st century society.

In contrast to the breadth of study available to both A-Level Language and Literature, much has been written about the limited scope of the current GCSE English Literature specification, its white-male centric focus resulting in a dearth of literary works by BAME writers being encountered by the nation's KS4 students. Sadly, this is something beyond our control and is one of the reasons why we have tried to incorporate as diverse a range of poetry, prose, drama and literary non-fiction as we can into our KS3 curriculum, working within the constrictions of a busy whole school timetable.

A brief overview of some of the KS3 curriculum content in which BAME groups are already represented is detailed below:

- In year 7, two recurring themes throughout the English curriculum are representation and strong female figures. The two are combined early in the Autumn Term as students look at Freida Khalo's famous self-portraits and the concept that meaning is not just communicated through words.

- Year 7 also have an opportunity to study Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – a work critics believe was an early exploration into the impact of colonialism. The subjugation of both Ariel and Caliban prompts much insightful discussion amongst our students, as does Caliban's status as an outsider.
- As referenced above, the year 8 poetry unit is titled People and Places. It is here students have opportunities to read and explore poems from a range of different cultures and traditions – as they once did on the GCSE syllabus – including those written by John Agard, Grace Nichols and Imtiaz Dharker.
- This year, we also have introduced a unit of work on historical fiction. We feel it is important for students to appreciate that the historical and social context in which texts are written and set is not necessarily the same in which they will be received. If they are able to do this in KS3 with texts such as *Ruby Red* (2007) by Linzi Glass (set in apartheid South Africa) or *The Middle of Nowhere* (2013) by CILIP Carnegie winner Geraldine McCaughrean, it will enable them to approach older texts – as dictated by the requirement to study 19th century fiction – with confidence and an understanding that they may encounter language and a depiction of events that would not be acceptable in today's society. This is perhaps illustrated by wider reading students have been given on Australia's colonial history and the 2008 apology to the 'Stolen Generations' to conclude their study of McCaughrean's novel.
- By year 9, the curriculum acts as a bridge between what student have studied at KS3 and what they will go on to do at KS4. A novel that all groups currently study is *Of Mice and Men*. It is a novel very much of its time – John Steinbeck's depiction of 1930s California is rife with racism, misogyny and prejudice towards those who are different. It is our sincere hope that no LGGS student would ever have to experience these in their own life, and in our English lessons it is made abundantly clear that language should never be used to discriminate against or assert dominance over another individual, regardless of gender, ethnicity or any other differentiator.

The treatment of some BAME characters in these works of fiction is abhorrent and yet, tragically, it is a reflection of real-life atrocities and attitudes, some of which still persist to this day. It is impossible for a teacher to tell any young person in their care how they should feel; all we can do is urge them to be empathetic and to be able to put themselves in another's position.

It is our hope than in sharing these texts with our students, they can learn from the horrors of the past, and we can work together to ensure that such deplorable events never happen again in the future.

If the events of the past few weeks have shown us anything it is that there is a real clamour for change. But this change can only be achieved through empathy and understanding, not through violence and aggression. To suggest that a secondary school's English curriculum could resolve centuries of oppression and abuse inflicted upon BAME communities would be insensitively hyperbolic. However, in ensuring that our lessons provide opportunities to discuss, to debate, to celebrate, to critique and to be inspired by writers of all different nationalities and ethnicities, we as a school community can at least play our part in acting as a force for real, positive change in society.

*Paper that lets the light
shine through, this
is what could alter things.*

(Imtiaz Dharker, 'Tissue', 2006)