

## What does diversity in the curriculum mean to you?

Diversity in the curriculum has become a hot topic, from the open letter to the Cambridge English faculty requesting that their offering is decolonised (Cambridgefly, 2017) to Brunel's own Will Self admitting that his course is dominated by men (Clark, 2018). Providing a curriculum that reflects all of the incredible work going on around the whole world is important – but to me, it remains unclear what 'diversity' really means.

Take, for instance, that open letter. Amongst other demands, the students stated that they wanted two postcolonial and British Minority Ethnic (BME) authors included on every examination paper, and a week of their Shakespeare study to be dedicated to postcolonial readings (Cambridgefly, 2017). Reasonable sounding requests, yet ultimately much more complex than merely inserting novels by Zadie Smith or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie into a reading list. How can anyone possibly decide that *White Teeth* is more worthy of a slot than *Purple Hibiscus*? When we're considering minority ethnicities, which deserve representation over and above others?

There is also the issue – perhaps unpopular – that blindly imposing quotas upon any curriculum fails to consider the true quality of the literature within it. If every examination must contain two BME authors, something has to give way to make that happen. With two included, perhaps at the expense of two other incredible texts which just don't fit the criteria, some faculties might consider their work done. Include a third? No, we've met the quota. Don't get ahead of yourself.

It's an issue I've come up against in redesigning the curriculum in my workplace, where all the lower school texts were by white men. Most of the characters were Caucasian boys, albeit from working-class backgrounds. This seemed ridiculous, especially as the teaching staff were entirely female, so I found texts by women, introducing Susan Cooper's *King of Shadows* and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. Yet this proved not to be a simple solution. Firstly, Cooper's novel, whilst written by a woman, focuses upon two white boys, not to mention the King of Western Literature himself, William Shakespeare. Secondly, the students failed to connect with the texts as much as they did Louis Sachar's *Holes* or Michael Morpurgo's *Private Peaceful*. In diversifying the curriculum, even in this tiny way, I'd denied some students access to texts they would have enjoyed and gained a lot from, all in the name of righting the gender imbalance. It was tokenism, and it just didn't work.

What also fascinates me about the current interest in curriculum diversification is how the government have actually shut this down. Since 2015, GCSE students have followed a literature curriculum including only authors of the British Isles<sup>1</sup>. Goodbye *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Of Mice and Men*; hello *Lord of the Flies* and *Animal Farm*. Granted, there is some diversity within text choices, such as Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* and even Simon Stephen's adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, whose main character Christopher has Asperger's. Yet these remain

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<sup>1</sup> The texts mentioned here are taken from the AQA English Literature syllabus (8702) for first teaching in 2015 (AQA, 2018). AQA has the highest market share for both English Language and English Literature at GCSE level (Ofqual, 2018, p. 8).

problematic. Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English*, might be narrated by a Ghanaian immigrant, but was written by a white British man. Kazuo Ishiguro may have been born in Japan, but his *Never Let Me Go* makes almost no reference to race. Given this, can we truly say that these make for a diverse curriculum?

This, for me, is the main issue: is diversity about the author or about the book? Including Ishiguro might tick boxes for the Cambridge students, but if the text reads like any other British novel, a tick-box exercise is all it becomes. Likewise, a BME character such as Harri in *Pigeon English* is much less convincing when you know it's been written by a white guy from Luton. Many might say that a truly diverse curriculum would need to have authors from a range of backgrounds writing about characters from those backgrounds – but where would this leave fantasy writers who don't happen to be wizards, trolls or vampires?

I do think it's important to include a range of texts from a range of authors of different races, classes, genders and sexualities. If we're to study Literature it has to be more than just the Wordsworths, Miltons, Orwells and Shakespeares. Yet, I don't think diversity is just about the author: Dorothy Koomson, who has been described as 'Britain's biggest selling black author of adult fiction', does not in fact want to write literature which reflects 'the Black experience' as 'Black people are just people like everybody else' (Kean, 2013).

And perhaps this is what we really need to focus on when we consider how to diversify the curriculum: people. What do people do in different situations? How do their backgrounds and histories influence that? Koomson's comment on the 'Black Experience', 'Whatever that is' (Kean, 2013), is particularly telling. Just because I am a white middle-class professional, does that mean that my experience is the same as every other white middle-class professional? I would say, quite emphatically, no. When looked at like this, the enormity of reflecting all the experiences in the world in one curriculum is only too clear.

So, diversity in the curriculum. Yes, it's important. Yes, it's something that we need to try harder at. But issuing quotas and selecting texts based solely upon an author's ethnicity or gender is one sure way to create a curriculum which is confused, disjointed and unfit for purpose. Diversify, but diversify carefully, thoughtfully and sensitively. It's not the simple solution we all want and will take longer than a cursory shoe-horning in of some more Monica Ali or Hanif Kureishi texts. But it'll be worth it.

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