

**Curriculum Conversations: How do students
respond to being included in discussions
around curriculum change?**

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Introduction

Throughout my teaching career, which began when the curriculum reforms introduced by Michael Gove were coming into force, the topic of what texts should be taught as part of the GCSE English curriculum has been debated. Conversations around GCSE text choice also encompass questions about whose voices are being heard within the English classroom and the impact that text choice at Key Stage 4 has on the English curriculum students experience more broadly.

The changes Gove introduced led to discussions in the media, within educational research, amongst the online English teaching community and amongst my colleagues in the various schools I have worked in over that time. Anecdotally, and from my research in Year 1, it became increasingly clear to me that many students and teachers desired a GCSE English Literature curriculum that included a greater variety of texts, in terms of both modernity and diversity. This led me to question why, even when new texts are being added by major exam boards, schools continue to teach the same texts that have been a stalwart of the English Literature curriculum for decades and how students feel about this.

However, my personal experiences, the literature and my research over the past two years have highlighted the real challenges faced by schools who want to implement text changes for GCSE English Literature. With school budgets growing ever tighter over the past decade and increasing pressure placed on teachers regarding student outcomes, it is understandable that departments cannot invest the time, money and resources into successfully embedding a new text into their curriculum.

A related area of concern for me has been student voice in the English classroom. Unlike conversations around the English curriculum and the growing interest in diversifying and decolonising it, student voice had already begun to fall out of favour by the time I began teaching. While having little experience of well-established student voice initiatives, I had begun to question why there was such limited opportunity for students to share any views on what they

are taught and why. I am a teacher who cares about decolonising the English curriculum (and I acknowledge that this goes beyond adding a new text to the curriculum) and is working to become an anti-racist practitioner. For me, empowering students of all backgrounds to have a voice is intrinsically linked to these processes, and this is what led me to the literature on student voice and its history within the British education system. It appeared to me that while many stakeholders within the education system were discussing the merits and consequences of GCSE text choice, students were not being given the opportunity to share their own views, even though they are directly impacted.

Moreover, as a teacher of English, the concept of voice appears to me as an intrinsic part of my subject because English teachers work to develop students' ability to be able to communicate and to be able to (both orally and in writing) construct their views and opinions on the texts they study. Not only does this relate to what I believe are the wider purposes of education, to support students in becoming confident and critical thinkers, but is also necessary for students to be academically successful at GCSE because exam boards want students to produce authentic and personal responses to the questions in front of them.

As I explored the issues of text choice and student voice, the importance of the concept of school belonging became clear. From my Year 1 research, I had come to understand the power that a sense of belonging within school could have on students. It interested me that although the research overwhelmingly highlights the importance and impact of belonging on students, little consideration had been given to whether having a 'voice' (being able to share thoughts and opinions and seeing these being acted on) had any impact on school belonging.

My current school is a large, mixed academy, serving students ages 11-18 in the South-East of England. The school is suburban and has a comprehensive intake which, like the general population, is becoming increasingly diverse. Like many schools, we have seen some students becoming increasingly disenfranchised since the Covid-19 pandemic. The issue of belonging and

student voice consequently seem particularly pertinent because the research overwhelmingly highlights the importance of school belonging and student voice may help us better understand the experiences of these students – although engaging them in student voice is likely to be challenging.

On a personal level, I fundamentally believe that education is a tool for social justice and social mobility. Like most teachers, I want students to feel a sense of belonging within school and within my classroom. While appreciating the power of wider influences, such as peer groups and school cultures, I have questioned the impact of the texts on the English Literature curriculum on students, especially those from marginalised groups. I was therefore interested in exploring if there was any link between the idea of school belonging and the texts students' study, because there was no research into this specific area.

Within my current role as Key Stage 4 Coordinator, I have worked to diversify the curriculum but have felt that opportunities to do this are more restricted than they are at Key Stage 3 and 5. My focus on Key Stage 4 has also allowed me to consider how little opportunity students have to voice their views on the exams that are so central to their education.

Within my department, I have already played an active role in diversifying the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and 5 but have had little opportunity to explore students' perspectives on these changes. The hope is that the knowledge gained from this intervention will help guide discussions around text change at Key Stage 4, by providing an important insight to students' perspectives on a possible new text and the process of student voice itself.

Consequently, in my literature review, I will be asking:

1. What does the GCSE English Literature specification currently look like and why are new texts being added?
2. What is student voice and how can it be effectively used in schools?

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3. What is belonging and why is it important?
4. How have concepts of student voice and belonging been applied to the English Literature curriculum?

Literature Review

What does the GCSE English Literature specification currently look like and why are new texts being added?

The current English Literature GCSE specification is the product of Michael Gove's 2017 reforms (DFE, 2013). At the heart of the new specifications was a focus on classic British literature, with the Department for Education stating that the GCSE would enable students to 'acquire knowledge of the best that has been thought and written' (DFE, 2013). The changes marked an end to the teaching of non-British texts, forcing teachers to stop teaching popular novels such as Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* at GCSE level. As of 2017, all students have been required to study a Shakespeare play, a 19th century novel, a post-1914 British text and an anthology of poems (DFE, 2013). When the reforms were announced, some argued that these changes signalled a return to a cultural heritage model of studying English Literature (Goodwyn 2012; Mansworth, 2016; Goodwyn, 2020; Rauf 2021). While canonical literature has often been viewed as a 'common inheritance' (p.50) within the Conservative party's education policy, it has been argued that the focus on this type of literature marginalises ethnically diverse and working-class students, by promoting the values of one group (Coles, 2013; Mansworth, 2016). Ahmed (2018) argues that Gove's framing of English Literature suggests that the subject is a vehicle to instill particular moral values through the teaching of canonical texts. Gove's reforms were viewed by some as a symptom of a growing resistance against a multicultural curriculum (Nelson-Addy et al, 2019). However, the cultural heritage model continues to be popular within schools, despite some arguing that the role of English Literature is not to ensure an appreciation of canonical texts, but to help students create a critical understanding of the world and how meaning is created (Goodwyn, 2012; Goodwyn, 2020).

The reforms to the English Literature curriculum were also thought to be a response to the ubiquity of the teaching of certain texts such as *Of Mice and Men* (something Gove was critical

of), but the reality is that many students are still being taught the same few texts (Kennedy, 2014; de Peyer, 2014; Pearson, 2017; AQA 2019; Elliot et al, 2020; Iffah, 2020). The post-1914 text remains the only part of the exam where students can study a novel or play by a non-white author, but only a small percentage of students study these texts, with the majority being taught Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* across all major exam boards (Pearson, 2017; AQA 2019; Elliot et al, 2020). Interestingly, in 2022, the largest exam board, AQA, announced the removal of three texts due to them being studied by less than one percent of students. One of these novels was Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, that while not dealing with issues of race and identity, was one of the few texts written by a non-white British author (AQA, 2022).

Exam boards have responded to criticisms about lack of diversity by announcing the addition of new GCSE texts. Along with a new poetry anthology, AQA is now allowing schools to teach the novel *My Name is Leon* or the plays *Princess and The Hustler* and *Leave Taking* (AQA, 2022). Similarly, Edexcel have added the plays *Refugee Boy* and *The Empress* and the novels *Boys Don't Cry* and *Coram Boy* to their offering (Pearson, 2021). Each of the texts is by a non-white British writer and deals with themes of race, identity and belonging. AQA announced that the addition of these texts was to help create a 'balanced, inclusive English Literature curriculum that resonates with their [students'] lives and better reflects modern Britain' (AQA, 2022).

While these additions are positive, there remains questions about how likely students are to study them. Many educators believe there should be more diversity of writers on the GCSE specification (Ahmed; 2018; Sundorph, 2020; Rauf, 2021; Kneen et al, 2022). Some have argued that the exclusion of all non-British texts and the tokenistic inclusion of writers of colour implies that literature from, or influenced by, other cultures is not high art (Mansworth, 2016; Elliot et al, 2020; Kneen et al, 2022; Watson et al, 2022). Currently, most students will only study a non-white author as part of an anthology of poems at GCSE, giving students little opportunity to explore their work in depth (Elliot et al, 2020; Kneen et al, 2022). It is also commonly argued that the

texts and writers that are on the GCSE specifications do not reflect the students in Britain's diverse and multi-cultural classrooms (Ahmed; 2018; Sundorph; 2020 Rauf, 2021). The concerning lack of diverse and contemporary voices means students cannot engage critically with their own cultural backgrounds through the literature they study (Kneen et al, 2022). Rauf (2021) also argues that narrow selection of texts is a product of a conservative and colonial mindset.

However, evidence suggests that while many English teachers ideologically agree with the addition of these new texts, a range of practical obstacles are likely to prevent them teaching them to their own classes. Teachers are confident with popular texts such as *An Inspector Calls*, and there are many resources to support teachers and students (Stewart, 2015; Watson et al, 2022). Financial pressures also play a role because buying new novels or plays is a financial gamble, which leads many departments to try and diversify their curriculum through poetry (Elliot et al, 2020; Watson et al, 2022). Even after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 put a fresh focus on the need to diversity the curriculum, changes were often tokenistic (Elliot et al, 2020). Therefore, until teachers are given the time to develop their teaching of new texts, and are provided with the resources to do so, students will continue to not study the texts by the few non-white writers who are available (Stewart, 2015; Howard & Khan, 2019; Sundorph, 2020; Elliot et al, 2020).

What is student voice and how can it be effectively used in schools?

While there is no singular agreed definition of student voice, widely used definitions have focused on student voice as something that allows young people to actively and meaningfully share their ideas and experiences and participate in decision making that will impact themselves and their peers (Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). While the terms 'pupil voice' and 'student voice' have been used interchangeably in some research, 'student voice' has

sometimes be used to refer to students in secondary education and is therefore the most helpful term for this research (Robinson & Taylor, 2006).

The concept of 'voice' itself has been explored by researchers (Britzman, 1989; Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Ranson, 2000; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Britzman (1989) carefully distinguishes between the various meanings of the concept of voice. For him, 'voice' can be considered as a literal reflection of the speech and perspectives of the speaker; metaphorical in that it represents the manner of the speaker's words and political because it links to the right to speak and be represented (Britzman, 1989; Brooker & Macdonald, 1999). Robinson and Taylor (2007) concur with Britzman's definition when they highlight that 'voice' refers to not only the words spoken by students, but also the multitude of ways students may express their feelings. For them, 'voice' goes beyond the nature of a student's literal voice (tone, inflection and accent) because it also 'gives insight into the metaphorical perspectives and worldviews that individual inhabits' (p6) (Robinson & Taylor, 2006). However, it is important to avoid the illusion that any group of students has only one voice (Arnot & Reay, 2004; Reay, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2006).

Student voice has a long history within education, but its popularity reemerged in the early 2000s (Mitra, 2006; Quinn & Owen, 2016). This may partly be down to the influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention stated that children had 'a legal right to participate in decisions that affect their lives' (Quinn & Owen, 2016, p61; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; UNICEF, 2022). Furthermore, in the UK student voice work developed alongside agendas around school improvement and new policies such as 'Every Child Matters' (Department of Education, 2003; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). However, some researchers who were optimistic about the power of student voice to impact education have reflected that their hopes have not been realised in the years since, which is reflected in the lack of research into student voice in the following years (Fletcher, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Student voice encompasses a breadth of approaches, and much research has focused on what can make it effective for all parties involved (Fielding & Prieto, 2002; Fielding, 2004b; Lodge, 2005; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). It is important for schools and teachers to reflect on the 'climate' (p219) of the school and to reflect on why they want to use student voice before implementing it (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Rudduck and Fielding (2006) discuss the concept of 'authenticity' (p226) in their discussions of student voice to encapsulate issues around credibility of student voice for students, including whether adult interest in their views is real or contrived and if their suggestions will be acted on. It is important that when student voice is sought, it is about issues that students feel are important and that the adults involved are genuinely open to listening and responding to students' thinking (Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). It is only then that students' opinions will not be 'treated as minor footnotes in an unaltered adult text' (p20) and can be used to genuinely improve their experiences at school (Fielding & Prieto, 2002; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Effective student voice allows for genuine dialogue to be created between students and teachers (Fielding, 2004b; Lodge, 2005; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). For Lodge (2005), dialogue is 'the building of a shared narrative' (p134) because it is about using talk to engage with others (Lodge, 2005). Dialogue is different from debate in that it does not involve confrontation and consequent ideas of winning and losing (Lodge, 2005). For dialogue of this kind to flourish within schools, 'physical and metaphorical' (p211) spaces must be created where students can speak openly and without fear (Fielding, 2004b; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Fielding (2004b) differentiates between the ways that students can be used within student voice: students as data source, students as active responders, students as co-researchers and students as researchers. For him, when students can act as co-researchers or researchers dialogue becomes central and increasingly student-led (Fielding, 2004b).

When implemented correctly, student voice can have an array of benefits for both students and teachers (Ranson, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2006; Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Student voice can allow students to discover and affirm their own views and enables them to share their unique knowledge about schools that adults cannot fully understand (Ranson, 2000; Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Mitra, 2006). Furthermore, Lincoln (1995) argues that student voice can also enable teachers to discover and strengthen their own voices (Fielding, 2001). However, it is interesting that teaching and learning ‘remain largely forbidden areas of enquiry’ in student voice projects within schools (Fielding, 2001, p101).

Issues around the power dynamics between students and teachers are repeatedly highlighted within research (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Fielding, 2004a; Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Ruddock, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Quinn & Owen, 2016). There has always been a difference in power between children and adults, and this is heightened in the context of schools because adults are figures of authority (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Schools and classrooms are not environments that always lend themselves to ‘individual affirmation’ (p224) and effective student voice relies on those in power truly listening to what is said (Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Hart et al, 2004; Fielding, 2001). Successful student voice requires teachers to view students in a different light, but there can be anxiety around disrupting these traditional power relations (Ruddock & Fielding, 2006). Schools are built around adult authority and the ‘transfer of power to children’ (p70) can cause complex issues (Owen & Quinn, 2016). Freire (1997) complicates the idea of adults empowering students by questioning the ‘paternalistic’ view that empowerment ‘flows from the educator to ‘educand’ (p13) (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Power is always at play during social communications and a truly democratic dialogue is difficult to achieve when considering the role class, gender and race play within society (Ellsworth, 1997; Reay, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

It is therefore important that student voice does not perpetuate existing hierarchies, which can happen in an environment where students can only voice their views when authorised to do so by a teacher (Rudduck, 2006). Like teachers, students can feel their own anxieties around participating student voice because they may fear being perceived as rude or have concerns about retaliation (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Rudduck and Fielding (2006) discuss Grace's concept of the 'ideology of immaturity' (p255) that prevents teachers from seeing students as responsible and capable. Consequently, if real change is to occur, a 'rupture of the ordinary' (p296) is required which puts demands on both students and teachers (Fielding, 2004a).

It is also vital to consider who is truly being listened to during student voice (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Student voice is fundamentally challenging, because there is a 'cacophony of competing voices' (p197) (Arnot & Reay, 2004; Reay, 2006). There is a danger that student voice can become tokenistic if only articulate students are listened to, so schools need to think carefully about who they are listening to (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Bourdieu argues that 'pupils with a linguistic code' (p11) that is most like that used within school are the ones schools most often choose to listen to (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Schools are microcosms for society, and issues of race, gender and class underpin social interactions, which means some groups (such as middle-class girls) are more willing to speak and schools find it easier to understand what matters to them (Ellsworth, 1997; Fielding, 2001; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Reay, 2006). Just as within classrooms, students have 'widely differing possibilities and potentials' (p172) for being included within student voice (Reay, 2006). Fielding (2001) raises the issue of formal language and questions how willing schools are to accept a 'more diverse discourse' (p102) offered by some students. Not only are there ethical implications to the question of who is listened to within schools, but student voice is unlikely provide an accurate representation of students' views if certain students are marginalised. It is worth questioning whether the views of those who are most often listened to within schools are likely to reflect the experiences of those who find school more alienating

(Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Quinn and Owen, 2016). It is vital that schools hear the views of these students so that they can understand why they find school challenging and support them to be successful (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

Schools and teachers must carefully consider why they wish to seek student voice because student voice practices can be 'simultaneously transformative and oppressive' (p33) (Thomson & Gunter, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). There is a risk that student voice can quickly become tokenistic if there is no genuine commitment to the approach (Hart, 1992; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Not all student voice practices are equal because while some lead to shared decisions being made between children and adults, others can be tokenistic and manipulative means of control (Hart, 1992; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Moreover, students will soon come to resent and tire of student voice initiatives if they continue to be asked about matters which they view as unimportant; if the language used is patronising or alienating and if student voice never results in actions which positively affect them (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006). Students may question the value of their views if they are only ever consulted during trial or pilot stages (Brooker and Macdonald, 1999). Robinson and Taylor (2007) also raise issue with schools using voice to only improve academic outcomes, rather than focusing on the personal development of students.

There are also questions about how much impact individual teachers can have when it comes to student voice, if there is not wider buy-in from the institution they work in (Fielding, 2001; Reay, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Ngussa & Makewa, 2014). Student voice practices can be time consuming and challenging, and therefore too large of a burden for individual teachers to set up effectively (Fielding, 2001; Reay, 2006; Ngussa & Makewa, 2014). While there have always been individual teachers committed to student voice, interpretations of what this means in practice can vary enormously (Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

There are also risks to student voice. Schools need to be careful that their student voice practice does not 'reinscribe pedagogic and institutional control' (p44) (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Student voice can be 'painfully revealing' (p179) for teachers with students' opinions both being difficult to hear and challenging to act on (Reay, 2006). However, while it is important that students see actions being taken for student voice to be credible, it may be that the action students propose are not feasible or will not be agreed to by those with power within schools (Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

What is meant by school belonging and why is it important?

Goodenow's (1993) definition of school belonging as 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment' (p80) has been widely accepted due to his definition acknowledging the array of factors that impact students' sense of belonging (Allen et al, 2016; Slaten et al, 2016; Porter et al, 2021). However, the focus on belonging as part of human psychology began with Maslow's (1943) work on the hierarchy of human needs, with the suggestion that one of the five fundamental human needs that drive people is a need for love and belonging. Importantly, he believed belongingness could only be achieved when a person's safety and physiological needs had been met (Maslow, 1943; Slaten et al, 2016).

There is some debate around the key features of belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that belongingness requires only two features - the need for frequent personal contacts with others and the perception of a stable relationship (p6). However, for St-Amand et al (2017) there are four defining features of school belonging: feeling positive emotions, relationships with peers and teachers, actively participating in and outside the classroom and aligning with situations and people. Considering the research around student voice, it appears that if done well, it could support belonging by allowing students to actively participate in decision making. However, in their review of the literature around belonging, Slaten et al (2016) note that there are gaps in the

research. Despite it appearing that those students on 'the margins of the educational system' (p9) find it hardest to feel a sense of belonging in school, research focusing on disadvantaged students and those from minority groups is limited (Slaten et al, 2016). It seems that just as with student voice, it is important to ensure that these students are not sidelined when it comes to researching school belonging.

Researchers have reached a 'strong degree of consensus' (p. 2) when it comes to the importance of school belonging (Porter et al, 2021). Allen et al (2016) argue that belonging is an 'essential aspect of psychological functioning' (p 1) and they, along with other researchers, have argued that it should be focused on a time when students are re-adjusting to school life post the Covid-19 pandemic (Porter et al, 2021). Belonging has been found to be especially pertinent for teenagers, who are developing their own identities away from their families for the first time, but its positive impacts are more far-reaching because it supports the transition into adulthood (Goodenow, 1997; Allen et al, 2016). As part of their longitudinal study, Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2012) focused on how students' sense of belonging changed over their time in high-school. They recruited 572 students from three high-schools in Los Angeles, with varying socio-economic levels and a range of ethnic groups. They argued that research into the sense of belonging felt by students in later adolescence is critically important because these students are starting to make decisions about their future that can have life-long economic and social implications for them (Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni, 2012).

Both 'academic and psychosocial' (p2) outcomes are benefitted by students feeling a sense of belonging in school (Allen et al, 2016). Goodenow (1997) believed that contextual, situational and individual differences are likely to impact students' effort and engagement within school, and therefore how successful they are likely to be. A sense of belonging in school has been shown to have a range of benefits. It has been shown to correlate with higher levels of attendance, higher likelihood of finishing school, less misconduct and less truancy (Loukas et al, 2010; Allen et al,

2016; Slaten et al, 2016). As Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2012) argue, it is clear that students who feel a sense of belonging in school may benefit from its effects well into the future.

It does seem clear that belonging is necessary, because it is associated with higher levels of self-esteem, happiness, adjustment, self-identity and psychological functioning (Allen et al, 2016). Schools do have the power to positively impact students' sense of belonging and can do this by supporting students in building a sense of belonging by helping them develop 'positive characteristics' (p4) (Allen et al, 2016; Porter et al, 2021). Resnick et al's (1997) longitudinal study has had a great impact on discussions around belonging in schools. This large-scale study, in which over ninety-thousand students from 134 schools were surveyed, found that a sense of belonging or connectedness within the school environment could act as a 'mediating factor' (p1) against anti-social and health-risk behaviours (Porter et al, 2021). Considering how to ensure students feel a sense of belonging in school should be a priority because when students do not feel this, it can seriously impact their psychological adjustment (Allen et al, 2016).

However, it is worth noting that not all groups of students are equally as likely to experience school belonging. There is consistent evidence which suggests that girls tend to report feeling a greater sense of belonging within schools than boys, although this difference may narrow as students get older (Witherspoon & Ennett; 2012; Gillan-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2012). Researchers have suggested that this may be because girls' behaviour is more likely to meet the behaviour expectations of schools and teachers (Banse et al, 2010; Gillan-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2012).

Contrastingly, ethnic differences in school belonging have not been clearly observed (Voelkl, 1997; Booker, 2006; Gillan-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2012). Some researchers have theoretically predicted that ethnic-minority students would report lower levels of school belonging because of the negative academic stereotypes they may face, but this has not been supported by evidence (Gillan-O'Neel and Fuligni, 2012). Booker (2006) reviewed the existing literature and found a mixed picture appears in research which focuses on African American students. Some research

found school belonging to be 'significantly predictive' (p2) of academic outcomes, but the correlation is not clear (Booker, 2006). While there is no one explanation for this, students may struggle to maintain focus and commitment to their studies if they are in an environment where they do not feel valued (Goodenow, 1997). There has been limited research into minority ethnic students' sense of school belonging and how this impacts their academic outcomes (Booker, 2006). While this gap exists in the US, it appears there is little research from the UK which focuses on ethnic differences in school belonging, so it is unclear if research from an American context can be neatly applied here.

Some researchers have highlighted that there is a lack of qualitative research into school belonging (Booker, 2006; Porter et al, 2021). Much research into the area of school belonging has been quantitative and involved the use of meta-analysis (Porter et al, 2021; Booker, 2006; Resnick, 1997; Allen et al, 2016). Slaten et al (2016) argue that more qualitative research needs to focus on older students, including those at university, so we can 'ensure successful educational outcomes across their lifespan' (p10). Booker (2006) argues there is a need for more 'holistic, mixed-method' (p6) research because this would allow for more consideration of how students' contexts impact their sense of belonging and because elements of qualitative research allow for more detail to be gathered on students' views (Porter et al, 2021).

How have concepts of student voice and belonging been applied to the English Literature curriculum?

There is little research focusing on students' views of GCSEs, and even less on their views on the GCSE English Literature curriculum. As some of the few researchers who have focused on this area in recent years from a UK perspective, Brown and Woods (2022) highlight how rare it is for students to be asked about their opinion on any GCSEs (Putwain; 2009; Woods et al, 2019). They argue that this may be because of the 'general, and remarkably anachronistic, lack of formal regular feedback mechanisms' (p53) available to GCSE students (Brown & Woods, 2022).

Consequently, it is hard to find any formal evidence of students' views on the texts they study for GCSE English Literature, although it may be found in an 'unstructured' form on social media websites such as The Student Room (Brown & Woods, 2022; The Student Room, 2024). However, this is not to say that students are unwilling to share their views. While the circumstances were unique, it is worth noting that over 48,000 students responded to an Ofqual consultation about GCSE and A-Level grading in 2021 (DfE and Ofqual, 2021; Brown & Woods, 2022). Despite the government being legally and ethically obligated to consult young people on any changes, significant reforms have been made to both GCSEs and A-Levels without adequate consultation (Biddulph, 2021, Brown and Woods, 2022). Consequently, at the end of their systematic literature review, Brown and Woods (2022) argued for 'a significant need' (p72) for more research into students' experiences of GCSEs.

When publishing her research in the early years of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, Biddulph (2011) concluded that due to the education climate, it was unlikely that 'any form of curriculum positioning' (p395) would occur. Her view seems to be supported by the relative lack of research into students' views on GCSEs in the following years, despite major reforms being implemented by Gove policy has maintained strong control over the GCSE curriculum and students are left with little influence over it (Biddulph, 2011). This issue is not unique to England, with Australian researchers Brooker and Macdonald (1999) arguing that in many Western schools, students' voices are marginalised when it comes to the curriculum. They acknowledge that the curriculum is influenced by various stakeholders, but that the agendas of some are purposefully favoured, and question if the best interests of learners are truly being served (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999). However, teachers do acknowledge the benefits of consulting students about the curriculum (Bron et al, 2016). Issues appear to arise from barriers such as a lack of clear practical strategies to implement student voice in curriculum design and planning and the maintenance and progression of structures that allow students' voices to be authentically heard and responded to (Bron et al, 2014; Flynn & Hayes, 2021).

Nevertheless, since the 1970s researchers have explored the concept of personal response within English, which has clear parallels with the notion of voice (Britton, 1970; Dixon, 1975; Durst and Newell, 1989; Doecke and Yandell, 2018). In response to the transition model, which viewed teachers as conveyors of privileged knowledge, and students as simply recipients, Britton instead focused on how language can be used to allow students to 'reflect and speculate' (p375) about a subject (Durst and Newell, 1989). Building on this work, recent research has also acknowledged the intrinsic connection between English and voice, through exploration of ideas of creativity and personal response within English (Smith, 2019a; Smith, 2019b; Bleiman, 2020; Smith et al, 2021; Atherton, 2024).

Through the creative construction of their own 'story' (p47) based on interviews with a trainee English teacher and her mentor in a South-West school, Smith et al (2021) depict an education system in which both teachers' and students' creativity is stifled by a singular focus on exams. They argue that teachers need to focus on English's 'hermeneutic foundations' (p49) and that the education system's current focus on cognitive science does not always align with knowledge in English (Smith et al, 2021). Researchers focusing on English education therefore argue for a greater focus on individual interpretation and response within the subject (Bleiman; 2020; Smith et al, 2021; Atherton, 2024).

It has been argued that English is a 'subject which moves' (p44) with its students because knowledge within the subject is generated through interpretation (Smith et al, 2021). Atherton (2024) acknowledges this within his book, discussing students' abilities to bring a fresh view on a text because when we read, we bring 'to bear on the text all of our past experiences' (p6). Consequently, literary meaning is derived through the response of the reader (Atherton, 2024). Smith et al (2021) promote teachers allowing students to simply experience a text by reading, exploring, reflecting on and enjoying it. For them, this not only naturally leads to good outcomes for students in exam but provides them with a well-rounded experience of English (Smith et al,

2021). This is supported by the exam boards themselves, with AQA's (2023) exam report for GCSE English Literature Paper 2 reminding students that 'they own their interpretation' (p7).

Although not part of a formalised student voice initiative, the English classroom is a space where students can develop a voice as they respond to the texts they study. Britton emphasised the importance of students using language, both written and oral, to explore and refine their ideas about the subject matter, but also themselves (Durst and Newell, 1989). In their work, Mason and Giovanelli (2021) propose the idea of encouraging students to become authentic readers who can interpret a text without input or mediation from a teacher (Atherton, 2024). If teachers could develop their students in this way, this would enable an informal but important dialogue between students and teachers about the texts they are studying. This would allow students to generate knowledge alongside their teachers and help them develop a sense of voice, which would benefit them in terms of exam results and give them more autonomy within the classroom (Smith et al, 2021).

However, concerns have been raised about the lack of focus on creativity within the English classroom in recent years. In her discussion of the 2014 National Curriculum for English, Smith (2019a) notes the disappearance of the idea of creativity. For her, English is an art and should therefore be taught through creative approaches (Smith, 2019a). If students are to develop a personal response to the texts they study a dialogic approach is needed within the classroom so that students can develop meaning and build on the ideas of others (Smith, 2019b; Blieman, 2020). In her consideration of the Newbolt report, Smith (2019a) argues that he wanted to promote individual voices within the classroom by celebrating and exploring the dialect and language of their communities and by not simply focusing on the canon but feels like much of this has been lost in recent changes. Therefore, although the study of literature is fundamentally collaborative, students are being positioned as receivers, rather than the makers, of culture (Smith, 2019a; Atherton, 2024).

Through her work at the English and Media Centre, Blieman (2020) continues to advocate for the importance of group work within the English classroom. In her view, group work is a 'curriculum aim for English teaching in its own right' (p97) because skills such as collaborating, defending your position and playing devil's advocate are necessary language skills for students to have in the modern world (Blieman, 2020). She criticises the views of those such as Didau (2015), who questions the fruitfulness of much group work within the classroom (Blieman, 2020). However, for some, discussion of literature is as intrinsic a part of studying it as reading and writing (Atherton, 2024). For Blieman (2020), it is vital that students have a voice and are heard within the English classroom because this shapes them into well-rounded young people.

Most attempts to gather students' views on the GCSE English Literature curriculum has focused specifically on the diversity of the curriculum, with a focus on race. Some of this research is very small scale, although some of their findings have been reflected in larger scale studies. Iffah (2020) taught her own Year 10 class *The Sign of Four* through a post-colonial lens and explored how this impacted students' responses to the text, whereas Ahmed's (2018) linguistic ethnographic pilot study on *Romeo and Juliet* focused on a single Year 8 class. The largest scale research project that has sought student voice on GCSE English Literature texts is the Lit in Colour project, supported by Penguin and the Runnymede Trust, whose work has been discussed previously (Elliot et al, 2020). They gathered the views of students about many of the most popular GCSE texts and influenced the inclusion of more diverse texts at GCSE. However, few students are yet to study these texts and no research has focused on students' views of the new offering.

However, there are clear benefits to asking students about their views on the GCSE English Literature curriculum. Firstly, the choice of text student study is important because literature itself has played such an important role 'in shaping the human existence' (p3) and offers students the opportunity to examine symbolic versions of life (Cairney, 2004). If literature can powerfully

impact students, it seems right they have a voice when it comes to what they study. Some have also argued that we should view curriculum as a process, and not just a final product and that the curriculum should be negotiated and not fixed (Bron & Veuglers, 2014; Bron et al, 2016). This enables students to be empowered within their learning and means that curriculums can be adapted to be most suitable for the students being taught it (Ngussa and Makewa, 2014; Bron et al, 2016).

There has been even less research focusing on the link between school belonging and the English curriculum. While it is not the key area of focus, the Lit in Colour researchers did touch on the concept of belonging when students responded to statements such as ‘the books I study in English Literature make me feel like I don’t belong’ (Elliot et al, 2020). The research did conclude that ‘young people themselves value a diverse literary diet’ (p60) but it is beyond the remit of the research to consider the relationship between this and belonging (Elliot et al, 2020). Galloway and Strand (2010) used school-belonging measures to research students’ feelings about Shakespeare specifically as part of their work with the Royal Shakespeare company. They found most students found Shakespeare boring, irrelevant to current society and unhelpful in helping students understand themselves (Galloway & Strand, 2010). While important work is taking place bridge the gap between feelings of belonging and Shakespeare, it is interesting to reflect whether the results would be much different if students were asked about their views on the other texts they study (Ahmed, 2018; Karim-Cooper, 2023; Shakespeare’s Globe, 2023).

Methods

Based on my reading of the literature around student voice, school belonging and the GCSE English Literature curriculum, my research questions were:

1. What are students' views on student voice within school?
2. How do students respond to being included in discussions around curriculum change?
3. Does being involved in a student voice project about a new English Literature text impact students' sense of belonging?
4. What can be learned about students' perspectives on the current English Literature texts and a new GCSE English Literature text through student voice?

The Intervention:

To answer my research questions, I designed a workshop as my intervention. It was an all-day workshop with a small group of Year 10 students who were all studying GCSE English Literature and it took place within school. The workshop's aim was to introduce students to one of the new plays introduced by AQA, *Leave Taking* by Winsome Pinnock. I was interested in finding out how students felt about this new text, and whether they believed it would be a good addition to the Key Stage 4 English Literature curriculum. The workshop involved lots of discussion activities, which was vital considering my research on student voice, as well as some written and group work (Smith, 2019a; Bleiman, 2020; Atherton, 2024). Although it was important that the workshop mirrored elements of students' usual lessons (we focused on areas such as context, analysis and the writer's intentions) it was also important that students were not confined by the workshop activities (Appendix 5).

Text Choice:

The text, *Leave Taking*, that is at the heart of my intervention was chosen in collaboration with my Curriculum Leader and the Key Stage 3 Coordinator for my department. We looked at the

information on the new texts released by AQA and discussed which text would most meet the needs of the department and students (AQA, 2022). We agreed it was important that we chose a piece of modern drama (because this text would replace *An Inspector Calls*) and felt that *Leave Taking* offered a high level of challenge and themes that would link well with our Key Stage 3 and 5 texts. The play also offers an opportunity for students to study a whole text written by a young, black, British woman, which the literature shows is rare for students studying GCSE English Literature (Elliot et al, 2020).

Sampling:

I chose to focus my research and aim my intervention at students studying GCSE English Literature in Year 10. I selected this year group because they have studied a proportion of the GCSE English Literature texts and there was less of an ethical dilemma when it came to taking them out of lessons for a day, in comparison to Year 11 who will shortly be sitting their GCSE exams.

I chose to invite students from one side of the year. By doing this, I hoped to get a representative group of students to take part because each side of the year consists of three ability sets and I wanted to address the risk of selection bias (Elliot, 2023). Much of the literature on student voice highlights that particular groups are most likely to be included in student voice, while other groups are marginalised, and I wanted to ensure the cohort was fairly represented (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

In the end, I had students from each class take part in the intervention. I collaborated with class teachers to show a slide to their groups giving some information about the research and to hand out the student information sheets to anyone who was interested. I also worked with class teachers, with their detailed knowledge of their students, to create a varied sample of students to take part.

While my sample was mostly representative, there were barriers to students who appear to be the least engaged in school participating. They were not always present in the lessons when class teachers spoke to their classes about the intervention (due to being absent or truanting the lessons) and were otherwise unwilling to take part. There is likely many complex reasons behind this, but the research suggests that these students are likely to be least comfortable with the dynamic created by student voice (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). I did attempt to address this by encouraging class teachers to make it clear to students that anyone could be involved and that it would not have a wider impact on them, but more work needs to be done to make these students feel included in student voice.

However, one class that I invited to take part was my own class. While this meant I already had 'rapport and trust' (p14) with them, it may have meant that these students felt pressured to participate (Farrimond, 2017). I addressed this by making it clear to students that participation was optional and that there would be no negative impact on them if they chose not to take part in all my contact with them and their parents/guardians. Only a small proportion of the class volunteered, which highlights that students did not feel they had to participate. But, because of the relatively small population of the school, it was impossible to avoid working with students I had previously taught. Therefore, I could not avoid my personal relationship with students possibly impacting my sample. There are ethical questions around the rapport that researchers build with participants, but this was at play within my research due to the pre-existing relationships I had built with some students as their teacher. In the end, I worked with a group of fourteen students (seven boys and seven girls).

Case Study Design:

I used elements of case study design in designing my research. Hancock et al (2021) define an explanatory case study as being used to 'answer a "what" question' and I felt this approach

would best help me explore my research questions (Yin, 2018). However, the case study I designed best fits Stake's (1995) definition of an instrumental case study because the case study's focus was the issues of text choice and student voice. As Yin suggests, I waited until I had read the literature into my areas of interest before beginning to gather any data (Yazan, 2015).

To gather the 'rich data' (p1) that case studies offer and to ensure that my case study was of high-quality, I planned to gather data from: interviews, questionnaires, field notes and student work (Hamilton, 2011; Merriam, 1998). The interviews and questionnaires, which are the most common form of data in case study research, were vital to my attempts to answer my research questions, and although my field notes were helpful in my triangulation, I am aware that observation is a highly subjective source of data (Merriam, 1998).

Merriam's development of Gold's (1958) work on the role of the observer within research helped me consider my positioning within the research (Brown, 2008). While the ideal outcome would have been to achieve Merriam's fifth position of collaborative partner, the reality is that my role most fit Gold's (1958) description of observer-as-participant because my interactions with participants in the research were relatively brief and still maintained a level of formality (Gold, 1958; Brown, 2008).

Although the sample size and scale of my research was always going to limit how applicable my research was to other groups, this approach would help 'lend weight and validity' (p2) to my findings (Hamilton, 2011). While the challenges of generalising findings of case studies are often cited, small-scale case studies, focusing on classes responses to the English curriculum, has been insightful in my reading of the literature into this area (Hamilton, 2011). As Stake (1995) argues, case studies do allow us to refine our understanding of an issue or topic, and that was what I hoped to achieve. Context sensitivity is one of case study research's strengths, and it has therefore been important in the analysis of my findings to root my discussion in the context of my school (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Hancock et al, 2021).

In my reporting of my findings and discussions, I have also considered Yin's insights into descriptive case studies. Although my findings will be reported in an unsequenced way, to best address my research questions, I will ensure all topics are covered to minimise bias (Brown, 2008; Yin, 1984). But as Stake (1995) argues, the role of the researcher in case study research is to find 'coherence and sequence' (p444) from the data.

Questionnaires:

At the start and end of the workshop, I asked students to complete an anonymous questionnaire online. I chose to use an online questionnaire to ensure it was truly anonymous for students, because I may have recognised their handwriting (Farrimond, 2017; Elliot, 2023). None of the questions related to students' personal characteristics, so there was no way I would be able to identify them. While this encouraged students to be honest I was unable to target particular students in my follow up interviews (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

I created the questionnaire on Microsoft Forms because it is a website students are familiar with and because the data can easily be exported for analysis. This was shared with students via ClassCharts, another website students use often. I asked students to complete the survey when they arrived at the workshop and before they left to get a higher completion rate (thirteen of the fourteen students completed the surveys).

I chose to keep the questionnaires short because I did not want students to become bored and fatigued (Cohen et al, 2018). However, this meant most of the data collected was quantitative, so students were limited in their responses. The language in the questions was simple so it was accessible, which would make students feel comfortable and ensure their responses were accurate. Fielding (2001) raises the need for teachers to be open to 'diverse discourse' (p102) in student voice, and although the question design may have limited this, I did leave an 'Any Other Comments' section at the end of the questionnaires (that was included in my coding) to allow students to express any ideas not addressed in the questions. But the data from these

questionnaires was collected in a short time and was helpful in shaping my interview questions which allowed me to gather a wealth of qualitative data (Hancock et al, 2021).

In the design of my questionnaire, I used Likert scale style questions. However, I chose to only give four options rather than the traditional five to avoid students picking the neutral option (Cohen et al, 2018). When planning my questions on school belonging, I considered the work of Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2012) and Tyler and DeGoey (1995). I adapted Tyler and DeGoey's (1995) questions from their study on school belonging and I also adapted questions from Galloway and Strand's (2010) work with the Royal Shakespeare Company to measure students' sense of belonging in relation to the texts they study for GCSE English Literature.

However, the Likert scale questions meant most of my questions were closed. While there were benefits to this (quick for students to complete and easier data analysis) there is a risk that these questions prevented students from raising issues that had not arisen in my reading of the literature. However, there was space for students to add any extra comments and lots of opportunity for more free-flowing discussion in interviews, so I will not have missed out on the 'rich[ness]' (p476) of qualitative data (Cohen, 2018).

The Workshop:

With permission from my Curriculum Leader and my Head of School, I ran my intervention workshop during the school day. Although there are ethical questions about asking students to miss other lessons, I felt this option gave students more autonomy. Farrimond (2017) points out that if the research is built into lessons, then students are not given the choice to not participate. To minimise the impact on students' learning, I made it clear that any missed work would need to be caught up on and that there was no obligation to take part. There were also ethical questions because running the workshop during the school day meant I had to have my other lessons covered, so I chose the day when I teach the least lessons to reduce the impact of cover.

However, running the workshops outside of lessons also gave me the opportunity to work with students from outside my own class.

The workshop took place within the school building, but I chose to hold it in our conference room rather than in a classroom. This was partly because the conference room was in a quiet part of the building and because the layout of the room lent itself to group discussion which was important for creating a dialogue between myself and students (Fielding, 2004b; Lodge, 2005; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Elliot, 2023). Although it was impossible to completely disrupt the power dynamics between teacher and students, I hoped that being in a new environment would support students to feel more comfortable and support a sense of dialogue to develop (Lodge, 2005; Farrimond, 2017; BERA, 2018; Elliot, 2023). My reading of the literature around student voice has therefore not only shaped my research questions, but also contributed to the design and ethical considerations around my intervention (Fielding, 2004b; Lodge, 2005; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

In order to give students a greater sense of how *Leave Taking* would function as a GCSE text, I planned the resources I used for the workshop with the GCSE assessment objectives in mind (AQA, 2020). As has been raised in the literature, a barrier to teaching new texts is a lack of resources to support students and teachers (Stewart, 2015; Howard & Khan, 2019; Sundorph, 2020; Elliot et al, 2020). I was able to use OCR's Teacher Guide to the play, which was created in partnership with Lit in Colour, and one revision guide has been published (OCR, 2021; Wharton & Armstrong, 2024). While there is a wealth of resources on other GCSE texts to support teachers to develop their subject knowledge, there is only one revision guide available for *Leave Taking* (AQA, 2022; Wharton & Armstrong, 2024).

Workshop Discussions:

During the workshop, there were lots of opportunities for students to discuss the play and their thoughts on it. The activities were designed to allow students to engage with the play without too much input from me because I wanted to allow students to achieve Mason and Giovanelli' (2021) concept of the authentic reader so they could autonomously decide their view on it and voice their personal response. This was important because I wanted the views they shared in their interviews and questionnaires to be as authentic as possible, but also because this approach helps students personally respond to and engage with texts (Atherton, 2024).

Consequently, often students were provided with extracts from the play with some broad questions to consider, but otherwise were left to discuss amongst themselves. While the limited time scale for the intervention likely meant that students were not purely authentic readers, they were given lots of time and space to develop their personal response to the play. From my field notes I can see that the group work and discussions allowed students to build on their ideas, constructively disagree with each other and work collaboratively (Blieman, 2020).

For practical reasons (the time to transcribe discussions from an all-day workshop and the number of people taking part in the discussion), I made notes about the ideas that students raised. Because it would have been unmanageable to run the workshop, engage with students and write down everything they said. This meant I did make a judgement about what ideas were most relevant to my research questions and does mean there could have been researcher bias at play (Mehra, 2002). However, the small group interviews I ran were recorded and transcribed to address this issue in my research.

I tried to write down what students said verbatim and did not standardise their language to ensure their voices were genuinely represented (Fielding, 2001; Powell, 2020). I have included these discussion notes in my coding.

Students Work:

At the end of my workshop, I asked students to complete a short piece of GCSE style writing on *Leave Taking* (Appendix 4). This was mainly to support students in forming their opinion about if they thought the play would be a good addition to their current GCSE English Literature curriculum through writing an analysis of it. However, the work also allowed me to reflect on how well the students had engaged with the play's ideas.

Post-Workshop Interviews:

I asked some of the students who took part in the research to take part in paired and small group interviews. Before these interviews took place, I planned my interview protocol, based on the work of Mason (2018) and Hancock et al (2021) to ensure my interviews were ethical, practical and effective.

Although some students may have spoken more freely in an individual interview, I decided on pairs and small group interviews so that students would feel more comfortable and could build on each other's answers (Lewis, 1992). I asked students to attend the interview with friends to minimise the effects of peer pressure. I attempted to achieve a representative sample of students to interview, aiming again for an even gender split and to speak to students from each class, but students who had a relationship with me because I have been, or am, their class teacher may have been more willing to give up their time.

These took place in the days following the workshop and I liaised with students to find a time that was convenient for them. The interviews ended up taking place at breaktime in my classroom. Although the classroom setting may have enforced student-teacher power dynamics, the classroom was a quiet space to hold the interviews (Hancock et al, 2021; Elliot, 2023). I tried to keep the interviews under fifteen minutes long, partly to not place too much of a burden on students' time, and partly due to the need to transcribe the interviews (CUREC, 2022).

I audio-recorded the interviews so that I could fully engage with students as they were talking and so that I could transcribe their answers verbatim. It was important that students 'linguistic codes' (p11) were respected and included within my research (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). This decision also ensured that I could use my body-language and facial expressions to reassure students they were truly being listened to.

The interviews were semi-structured and I used the quantitative data from the questionnaires to help shape my interview questions. I wanted to ensure I was focusing on my research questions, but felt it was important that students had the opportunity to have autonomy in the conversation (Brenner, 2006; Hancock et al, 2021).

Field Notes:

During the workshop, group discussion and straight after my small group interviews, I made field notes because I wanted to achieve 'methodological triangulation' (Cohen et al, 2018, p265). These field notes were important for a variety of reasons: they helped me closely observe the environment, supported me in writing down my impressions shortly after events and allowed me to reflect on any biases (Emerson et al, 2011; Phillip & Lauderdale, 2018). The field notes enabled me to reflect on students' body language and tone and helped me supplement my language focused data (Cohen et al, 2018; Phillip & Lauderdale, 2018). It was vital that my notes were 'sufficiently full and vivid' (p388) so that I could accurately bring them into any discussion of my findings to add richness to my analysis (Cohen et al, 2018; Phillip & Lauderdale, 2018; Deggs and Hernandez, 2018).

Coding:

Because there was a wealth of literature to draw upon in my analysis, my coding has mainly been deductive. To best answer my research questions, I have used thematic coding, based on the

findings from my literature review. While focusing on responding to my research, I remained open to new codes (Appendix 3).

Throughout my research, I have maintained a code log to ensure clear inclusion and exclusion criteria and keep track of changing codes (Appendix 2)

When I began coding thematically, I used the four key focuses from my research questions as a starting point (school belonging, students' views on student voice, curriculum change conversations and students' views on the new and current English Literature texts). However, it soon became clear that these codes were restrictive and did not represent the nuanced picture that appeared from my interviews and discussions within the workshop. For example, discussions around the English curriculum and new texts became four separate codes: plot and engagement, practicality, age of texts and diversity. This has allowed me to make links between students' experiences of the current English curriculum; their views on *Leave Taking* and the impact of the workshop, while accounting for the range of views shared.

Similarly, the core issue of belonging was split into three codes: belonging in school, belonging through texts and belonging in the English classroom. These enabled me to consider how students' experiences of belonging vary and how they are impacted.

Finally, data around student voice was divided into the codes: being listened to, running of the school, opportunities for student voice and curriculum change. I used these codes to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the student voice being offered to students' currently; how students responded to being asked about curriculum change and the topics usually covered in student voice at school.

These codes have supported me in my analysis of my findings as part of my descriptive case study because it is vital that the views of students are accurately represented (especially due to the focus of this project) and to ensure I am accurately responding to my research questions.

Collaboration:

My Curriculum Leader collaborated with me throughout the planning and implementation of my intervention. As well as helping with text choice, she supported with the logistics, including advocating for me in discussions with the Head of School to have students off timetable for the day to take part, because the focus of my research supported department priorities. She also supported me in choosing classes to speak to and was helpful in encouraging students to take part.

After analysing my results, I met with various members of my department to discuss my findings. I spoke with my Curriculum Leader and the Key Stage 3 Coordinator about students' positive response to being asked about curriculum and considered ways that this could be embedded into our practice. While the department often use Microsoft Forms to garner feedback from students, we considered the importance of trying to build in time to speak face-to-face with students to gather a more detailed picture. However, because of time pressures and the fact that this approach to student voice is not embedded school-wide, this has its challenges. I also met with the incoming Key Stage 4 Coordinator, because I will be leaving the school at the end of the academic year. We are aligned on the importance of including a range of voices within the English department, but the reality is that implementing a new text would be a challenge within our department, for many of the reasons raised in the literature. While some teachers are willing to teach new texts, we also have team members who would be resistant to change. It would also be a financial risk in terms of investing in texts, and at a time where the department are striving to improve their English Literature GCSE results, it is also a risk in terms of outcomes. However, I did stress how many students valued diversity in the curriculum in terms of race, gender and sexuality and their desire to study more modern texts and how we could build this into our existing Key Stage 4 Curriculum and to future changes.

While my intervention may not have led to immediate change within my department in terms of text choice and student voice, I hope that my findings will continue to impact the department's thinking and approach in future. Personally, I will also be able to take the findings into my new school where, as Curriculum Leader for English, I will have more power to implement change.

Ethics:

Before beginning my research, I gained approval from The Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) (EDUC_C1A_23_304) and had completed the University of Oxford's 'Research Integrity: Core Course' before planning or carrying out my research. Through all stages, I have followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines to make sure the young people I was working with were protected and that I was handling data correctly (BERA, 2018; CUREC, 2020; CUREC, 2022).

Before beginning my research, I contacted my Head of School to get their permission and to inform them of what would be involved in my research. I was also in constant conversation with my Curriculum Leader when it came to my research.

I did consider the ethics of using opt-out forms to gain parental permission for students. I considered Farrimond's (2017) discussion of this form of gaining permission and tried to ensure it was a genuine option for students to opt-out by giving parents/guardians the forms many weeks in advance and by not running the sessions within usual English lessons. Farrimond (2017) discusses how an incomplete data set can have ethical implications, and I felt that using an opt-out form would ensure a greater range of the student population would take part. Due to the nature of my research, it was vital to minimise barriers to participation for those who may not always be represented in student voice (Ellsworth, 1997; Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

I sent the opt-out forms to parents/guardians via our school office and sent them out approximately a month before the workshop was taking place, so students and parents/guardians had enough time to carefully consider if they wished to participate. However, I did have some opt-out forms returned to me in the week before the workshop which would have impacted my already small sample. After a discussion with my supervisor, I reached out to some more students. I followed the protocol I had previously to gain permission, but I gave these students hard-copies of the opt-out form and information sheet; emailed their parents/guardians directly and contacted them through ClassCharts to ensure students and parents/guardians were fully informed and had a genuine opportunity to not participate in the research (BERA, 2018). The information sheets provided to students and parents/guardians were completely transparent about the nature of the research and its aims so that they could give informed consent (Farrimond, 2017; BERA, 2018; Cohen et al, 2018; Elliot, 2023). In transcriptions and in the discussion of my findings, I will refer to students by pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity (Farrimond, 2017). However, I will use pseudonyms that reflect the participants' ethnicity and culture so that their cultural identity is not erased.

Throughout the planning and implementation of my research, I considered the complex power dynamics between myself and the student participants (Farrimond, 2017; Cohen et al, 2018; Elliot, 2023). While I addressed this by making it clear to students that they did not have to take part in the research and could withdraw at any time, the power imbalance is unavoidable. Trying to create a truly democratic dialogue for this project was likely not possible in the time frame, and because complexities like race, class and gender are also at play, but I did try to reduce it (Ellsworth, 1997; Reay, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Papadopoulou & Sidorenko, 2021).

Findings

Students' Views on Student Voice:

Before and after taking part in the workshop on *Leave Taking*, I asked students to complete a questionnaire with Likert scale questions on their views on student voice. All the data from the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

I asked students to respond to the statement 'I get lots of opportunities to share my thoughts and opinions in school'. Before the workshop, most students agreed with the statement, with nine students either agreeing or strongly agreeing. After the workshop, there was no change. There was some change between questionnaires when students responded to the statement 'I believe that if I share my thoughts and feelings about school, they will be acted upon'. Before the workshop, only four of the students agreed and afterwards there was an increase to seven. Interestingly, slightly more students believed that 'students can change and influence how things are done at my school' prior to the workshop compared to after it (eight agreed before the workshop, compared to six students either strongly agreeing or agreeing afterwards).

However, there was some change when it came to the statement 'I think the adults at my school value my thoughts and feelings'. Before the workshop, just over half of students agreed (two strongly agreed while five agreed) but after the workshop nine of students either agreed or strongly agreed. The workshop also appeared to influence students' responses to the statement 'I believe I have influence over what I am taught in school.' Prior to taking part in the workshop, only five students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, compared to eight of the students by the end of the session.

Discussions About Curriculum:

After students had completed the all-day workshop with me in school, I asked them to complete a second questionnaire, which included some extra Likert scale questions to explore their views

on the day. In general, students responded positively to having taken part in the workshop, with all students either agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'I enjoyed being asked about my opinion on the English Literature curriculum' and that 'being involved in today's session helped me feel more actively involved in my learning'. All students also agreed that they would like to be asked about their views on the curriculum in other subjects (100% of them agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I would like to be asked about my thoughts and feelings on the curriculum in other subjects').

However, there was some variety in responses when it came to students' opinions on whether they would be listened to. The majority did believe that the opinions they had shared with me during the workshop would be listened to and acted upon, but two of participants disagreed. Similarly, two of the students disagreed with the statement 'taking part in today's session has made me think my thoughts and feelings are valued by the school'.

Student Voice and Belonging:

Students were also asked to respond to a series of statements designed to gauge their sense of belonging in school, both before and after the workshop.

Positively, both before and after the workshop all students agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that 'I feel part of my school' and that 'I feel close to people at my school' (this remained the case after the workshop). However, while the majority of students agreed with the statement 'I feel a sense that I personally belong at my school', there was one student who still disagreed after the workshop. However, in the second questionnaire all students agreed that 'I think what I learn in English will help me when I leave school' (one had disagreed prior).

The statement in this section of the questionnaire that gained the most split response was 'The GCSE English Literature texts make me feel that I belong'. Before the workshop, five agreed and seven disagreed, whereas afterwards, two strongly agreed, six agreed and four disagreed.

Attitudes to GCSE English Literature Texts:

Before and after introducing students to the play *Leave Taking*, I wanted to gather their views on the GCSE English Literature texts more broadly. In both questionnaires, the majority of students agreed that 'I enjoy studying the GCSE English Literature texts (nine agreed or strongly agreed in the first questionnaire, versus eleven in the second). However, students had more negative response to the statement 'I find the GCSE English Literature texts exciting and engaging' with seven disagreeing before the workshop and three still disagreeing afterwards.

Students had a variety of opinions on the statement 'I think we study a diverse range of writers' with almost eight students strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement before the workshop. But, in the follow-up questionnaire there was a slight increase because nine agreed or strongly agreed.

In both, a small majority students disagreed with the statement 'I think the GCSE English Literature texts should stay the same for future students' (seven disagreed in both questionnaires). After the workshop, more students disagreed with the view that 'I think the GCSE English Literature texts deal with issues that are important to young people today' (seven versus six).

I was also interested in gathering students' views on *Leave Taking* itself – especially whether they enjoyed it and whether they think it would be a good fit for the GCSE English Literature curriculum. Reactions to the play were overwhelmingly positive, with all students strongly agreeing or agreeing that they had enjoyed studying it and that it would be a suitable text for them to study as part of the English Literature GCSE. All students also agreed that the play deals with issues that are relevant to young people today (seven strongly agreed and five agreed) which was significantly more positive than responses to the same statement about the English Literature GCSE texts students currently study.

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While all students felt that 'Leave Taking offers something different than the other texts we study for GCSE English Literature (ten strongly agreed and two agreed) not all found the characters in the play 'interesting and relatable', with two of students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Discussions

Students' Views on Student Voice

Opportunities for student voice:

The findings from the questionnaire suggested that students generally felt that there were some opportunities within school for them to share their views, but that they were not always convinced they were listened to. I used the findings from the Likert scale questions to shape my interview questions on student voice (although the interviews were semi-structured to allow students more freedom and agency in the conversation).

In each interview, students tended to agree student voice was generally confined House Week (a week each term where students are in vertical mentor groups) for the general school population. In separate interviews, Jess and Greta referred to the 'feedback forms' that students are asked to complete each House Week. In our discussion, Greta said that she found these forms 'restricting' and felt that the questions were 'odd' because they forced students to consider what the school was already doing. She found the questions so limiting she began to 'write outside the boxes' to share her genuine views.

Lodge (2005) believed that effective student voice should create a 'shared narrative' (p134) and limiting student voice to written forms appears to inhibit this, with the particular questions used by the school encouraging students to doubt the authenticity of the questions being asked because students feel the school has an agenda (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Fielding (2004b) would likely view this version of student voice as using students as data, and while this may have its uses, it does not develop the dialogue that so many researchers into this area argue for (Fielding, 2004b; Lodge, 2005; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Although due to the time limitations of my own student voice research, I cannot say that I achieved Fielding (2004b)'s goal of making students researchers, I believe that the

workshop's design allowed them to be active responders. In order to achieve a true dialogue, students needed to become accustomed to being asked about their views without fear, but this is near impossible to achieve as a single teacher or researcher because student voice is time-consuming and involves significant shifts in power dynamics (Fielding, 2001; Fielding, 2004b; Reay, 2006; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Ngussa & Makewa, 2014; Owen & Quinn, 2016).

Involvement in student voice:

I also wanted to explore students' views on who is involved in student voice. Rachel believed that 'there are opportunities available' and that it was personal choice for her to not take part in them. However, in the same interview Mark stated that he felt student voice opportunities were 'pretty limited'. A few students brought up the 'student council' as a space where students could get involved with student voice. Only one student I interviewed was a student leader, and I was interested in why the others did not want to be involved. For Matt, it just did not 'really interest' him, although he did feel that it was the 'same sort' of students who were part of student leadership. Whereas Rachel felt like it was something she had not been 'approached' about during her time at school. Although, she was positive about this and argued that 'I think the right people do it, because they want to do it.' The students' views that similar types of students take part in student voice is mirrored in the research into this area.

As a member of the student leadership team, Greta had some interesting insights. We discussed what type of students were involved, she laughed and told me 'the exact type of person you'd expect to be a student leader.' When I questioned further, she said those involved did not represent the wider student body because 'the teachers pick it... we send in an application, they look at your praise points, they look at your detention history, they look at your grades, and they pick it'. This reflects the literature, with the students having unequal access to student voice depending on how easily they fit into the expectations of schools (Ellsworth, 1997; Fielding, 2001;

Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Reay, 2006). Iris agreed that usually the 'studious' students took part in student leadership, but both Greta and Iris discussed how students often stop attending meetings, so they could understand why teachers targeted certain types of students. Greta also felt that past Key Stage 3 most students stop engaging with student voice in any way unless they were 'holding on to faith' that they would be listened to.

However, I noted in my field notes that those dominating the conversation in the workshop (speaking most often, showing a willingness to challenge the views of others and speaking most loudly) were often boys or high ability students. Researchers have suggested that certain groups, notably middle-class girls, are more likely to have their voices heard in student voice. However, due to the school's demographic, many participants would be considered from middle-class backgrounds, and the gender dynamics seemed more powerful than those of class (Ellsworth, 1997; Fielding, 2001; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Ready, 2006). But Bourdieu's belief that those most confident with the 'linguistic code' (p11) of school are most likely to participate in student voice is likely to be true to (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). This was not only reflected in the dynamics of the discussion, but also in the demographic of students unfortunately absent from my research (Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Issues covered in student voice:

The data from the questionnaires, and from reviewing my field notes, made it clear that while students had enjoyed being consulted on the English Literature curriculum within the workshop, it was not something they were accustomed to. I was therefore interested in finding out more about the topics usually covered in student voice. In each interview, it became clear that students felt they were mainly asked about practical elements of running the school. Both Mark and Tyler felt the main issue they were asked about was 'toilets' (they clarified that this referred to the maintenance and upgrading of them). Jess, Rachel, Iris, Greta and Mark all felt that all the

student voice they had taken part in focused on the 'day to day' and 'general' running of the school.

From the interviews, it became clear that an issue with student voice was that it was about topics that did not interest the students. Tyler felt that the topics they were asked about were becoming monotonous because 'it's always the same stuff every time' while Mark thought the topics discussed 'didn't seem that interesting.' As a student leader, Greta felt that teachers did not always act on the concerns most important to the students and instead acted upon issues that were easy to remedy or that they valued. This reflects the issue of authenticity raised by Rudduck and Fielding (2006) because it is vital that students are asked about issues that they care about. Although the topic of the workshop was decided by me, I did try to address this issue but allowing space for open discussion and actively allowing students to lead the conversation (even when it may not have matched with my research and research questions).

However, even on the limited issues they were asked about, students were unconvinced that their voices were being heard. Again, students referred to House Week, but Tyler felt that 'you get together and they don't really listen' while Jess, while discussing the feedback forms, said 'I'm not entirely sure they're listened to...'. Ines believed that it was not a lack of opportunity for students to get involved with student voice that was the issue, arguing that 'we do have a lot of opportunities to talk', but that students were not being listened to. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) warned that students will begin to resent student voice and here, participants had come to believe student voice within school was tokenistic (Hart, 1992; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

In a separate group interview, Tyler raised a similar point. He felt that during House Week student voice became a place for students to 'complain about stuff' but that 'nothing's been done.' In her interview Ines summed up the dangers of running student voice but not making students feel heard when she questioned 'if you're not going to be listened to, what's the point in even saying

it?'. Similarly, Iris described the experience of asking friends on the student leadership team to raise a concern for her, and her friends feeling staff had been dismissive (saying they would take it on board and not mentioning it again). Much research highlights both the benefits of student voice, but also the significant risks if students do not see it resulting in any positive action (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006).

Discussions About Curriculum

The rarity of curriculum conversations:

None of the students I interviewed or who completed the questionnaires appeared to have much experience of taking part in student voice around issues of curriculum, which reflects the experiences of most students in England (Putwain; 2009; Woods et al, 2019; Woods et al, 2022). However, the questionnaire data showed that pupils were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. Part of this enthusiasm may have stemmed from the fact they were being asked about something new, as my findings have suggested students become bored and disengaged when continuously asked about the same issues, especially when they cannot see that their views are making an impact.

While I acknowledge the element of novelty, the positive response could also highlight how students value being part of face-to-face conversations and discussions when taking part in student voice and that only using questionnaires and feedback forms may feel tokenistic for them (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Also, while I tried to remain neutral in my role as researcher, due to the nature of the research (which was explained in full to all participants) students may have understood that on this occasion their views would be listened to and acted upon in at least some sense, because their views were vital to my project. However, while Greta directly addressed this in her interview, she did not think that this meant that any change would occur that would impact her with the most modern text she will study at GCSE still being from 'the 1940s'.

Using the Likert scale data from the questionnaire, I prepared questions to explore how students felt about being asked about the curriculum. Tyler felt that it was 'refreshing' to be asked about curriculum, rather than the running of the school more generally and Leon felt it was 'good to be heard'. Rachel felt it was 'pretty necessary' that students were included in conversations around the curriculum, especially considering the lack of diversity on the current curriculum. Back in 2001, Fielding argued that teaching and learning 'remain largely forbidden' (p101) topics of enquiry when it comes to student voice, and this is reflected in the experiences of the participants. This created an interesting challenge during interviews because not only were the usual unequal power dynamics between student and teacher at play, but even the most confident and articulate students were unaccustomed to discussing issues of curriculum choice. As Brown and Woods (2022) suggest, students have little formal and structured opportunities to share their views on curriculum choices and my project did not have the space and time for students to develop this fully (Putwain; 2009; Woods et al, 2019).

Discussions about curriculum in other subjects:

In the questionnaire, all students said they would like to be asked about their views on the curriculum in other subjects. I wanted to explore this more during the interviews and it became clear that many of the participants had a practical view as to which subjects these conversations may benefit. Quickly, a few students stated Maths as a subject in which they did not see a benefit in being asked about what they are taught (Harry, Tyler, Jess and Ines brought this up). However, students named a variety of subjects in which they would like to be involved in discussions around what they are taught, including: Art, History, Photography and Science. But for Rachel, English was the most important subject for these discussions to focus on due to the breadth of choice of texts, possibly reflecting the view that the English curriculum should evolve, because the texts available for study are always changing (Bron & Veuglers, 2014; Bron et al, 2016).

Will students be listened to?

The interviews reflected mixed responses in the questionnaire about whether students felt they would be listened to. While some students believed that I (I feel it was difficult for students to separate their teacher from my role as researcher) would 'obviously' have a greater influence in changing the English Literature curriculum than the staff in charge of House Week, not all were convinced. Here, the complexity of my role of teacher and researcher was at play because although I was genuinely listening to students' views, I am not in a position of influence to guarantee any change, although I will be sharing my findings with my Curriculum Leader and other TLR holders within my department (Fielding, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Rachel was positive, but more tentative than Tyler, believing that there 'might be changes to the curriculum' and that it had been good to be 'heard'. Similarly, Jess felt that there had been a benefit in taking part in the project, even if the changes were not made because it was good to know 'that these options' were out there (in reference to the new texts being offered by AQA). However, Ines was more restrained in her views, believing that 'not much' of what had been shared would ever be acted upon. This view is understandable considering what students had said about their experiences of student voice and highlights how students can become disengaged from student voice (Hart, 1992; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Quinn & Owen, 2016). This is especially notable, because Ines would fit most researchers' definition of a student who has a higher likelihood of being listened to within student voice because of her class, gender and academic abilities (Ellsworth, 1997; Fielding, 2001; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Ready, 2006).

Student Voice and Belonging

School belonging:

The questionnaires, both before and after the workshop, highlighted that all students did feel a sense of belonging within school because they all felt 'part of the school' and 'close to people at the school', with only one student feeling like they did not personally belong. While this finding is positive because research overwhelmingly highlights the benefits of school belonging, it does

raise questions over the limits of the sample (Allen et al, 2016; Porter et al, 2021). Firstly, the sample size was small (fourteen students took part in the workshop) and although I did try to have a representative sample (there was an equal gender split and students from all ability sets), the workshop was voluntary. This meant that all students who took part had to have some interest in the workshop and I was unable to recruit any of the most openly disengaged students in Year 10, who are likely to feel the least sense of belonging within school. Slaten et al (2016) highlight that although the research is limited, disadvantaged and those on the 'margins' (p9) of schools are likely to feel the least sense of belonging in school. It was a challenge as a researcher, and for schools more generally, to encourage these students to take part, and this may be because they do not think their opinions will be valued or fear repercussions (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

What impacts students' sense of belonging?

In my interviews, I wanted to find out more about what made students feel like they belonged in both school and their English classrooms. Peer groups seemed to positively impact students' sense of belonging within school, but Greta, who has an obvious American accent said that 'being obviously not from this country' made her feel like an outsider when she was school, due to how she was treated by students and an ex-teacher. Greta and Iris felt that students could find groups of like-minded people, but there were those in school who said 'bigoted' things. When we talked about belonging in the English classroom, Iris emphasised how having 'really good teachers' helped whereas Greta valued all the 'discussions' you got to have. However, both girls are in a top set, and wondered whether they would feel such a sense of belonging and safety to share their views without judgment if this was not the case.

However, even students who did feel they belonged within their school community, were not made to feel a sense of belonging from the texts they were introduced to in their English Literature GCSE. Slightly more students felt that the 'English Literature texts' made them feel like they

'belong' after the workshop on *Leave Taking*, which could suggest that students' sense of belonging is positively impacted by studying texts written by, and including characters, from non-white backgrounds, but the sample is too small to make this conclusion. However, in our interview, Greta enthusiastically talked about the positive impact that studying Dean Atta's *Black Flamingo* (a verse novel about a young, gay black man) in Year 9 had and how important she believed positive LGBTQ+ representation to be.

But during the workshop Daisy argued that many of the white male writers studied at GCSE also held and perpetuated 'outdated' views about women and race in their texts. It raises questions about to what extent exposing students to these portrayals of issues such as race, class and gender, with little in the curriculum to counterbalance it, creates a space where all students feel like they belong. The students brought up how so far in their GCSE the only ethnic minority characters they have studied are *The Merchant of Venice's* Shylock and the Prince of Morocco. In our discussion about the texts and belonging, Iris and Greta explained how they had not personally been made to feel that they did not belong due to the texts, but they felt that any Jewish students could be 'offended' by *The Merchant of Venice* and that the portrayal of people of colour was 'nasty'. But notably, they felt that teachers 'acknowledging' these problematic views was important and would make students feel more comfortable. These views reflect Galloway and Strand's (2010) findings that that most students reported finding Shakespeare irrelevant to current society and unhelpful in helping them better understand themselves, which means we must reflect both on how we teach Shakespeare, but also the other texts we introduce students to (Galloway and Strand, 2010).

Relatability:

During the workshop, the idea relatability was brought up by various students. Ines told the group that 'I am an immigrant and can relate to the themes.' I tried to gather more information about this, and the sense of belonging the students felt in the English classroom, in my paired interview

with Jemma and Ines. Again, they both brought up the importance of a text being ‘modern and relatable’ and felt that *Leave Taking* ‘gives you options on context and stuff’ compared to information ‘that wouldn’t really be used nowadays’ (in the workshop we discussed contextual factors such as The Windrush Generation, The Windrush Scandal, youth culture in the 1980s and Thatcherism). They also brought up the accessibility of the language used within the play compared to that of Shakespeare and Dickens. In the workshop, Tobias had also mentioned how he had enjoyed getting to study a text that had teenage protagonists and a setting that felt familiar because there was little opportunity to do this in the other texts he had studied. Iris agreed with this view in her interview, because the characters were young and going through ‘similar issues that we have today’ including ‘racism’ and ‘gender stereotypes’. The choice of text student study is important because literature itself has played such an important role ‘in shaping the human existence’ (p3) and offers students the opportunity to examine symbolic versions of life, so if we want to nurture belonging in the English classroom we must consider the portrayal of issues such as race, class, sexuality and gender (Cairney, 2004).

While a myriad of factors influences students’ belonging, and being involved in student voice may have little impact, the benefits of belonging are so great (both academically and socially) that schools have a responsibility to cultivate it whenever they can (Loukas et al, 2010; Allen et al, 2016; Slaten et al, 2016). While the size of my sample, and the positive findings that many students already felt a strong sense of belonging within school means it is impossible to draw any conclusions between their belonging and student voice, it remains an area that is unresearched. Research has suggested that student voice has many benefits, including allowing students to affirm their views and develop confidence, which are likely to support the development of belonging (Ranson, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2006; Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Attitudes to the GCSE English Literature Texts

Diversity in the GCSE English Literature curriculum:

There were also mixed responses when it came to opinions about the diversity of the writers studied for GCSE English Literature, which was mirrored in the responses to my questions on this topic during interviews and during the workshop itself. In the workshop, students raised some of the issues they had with the current GCSE English Literature offering, with Greta pointing out that students 'only study white men at GCSE' which sends the message that white men are the only ones with 'views worth studying', echoing Mansworth's (2016) concern that the current GCSE English Literature offer promotes the values of one group.

However, during our interview Tyler was positive about the GCSE texts because they had 'a lot of depth' but Iris argued that while the art of white male writers is still important and valued, it had to be weighed up against the need for 'inclusion' on the curriculum. The participants' experience of the English Literature curriculum reflects the Lit in Colour reports findings that the majority of students in England do not study a full text by a non-white author, and many will not study a full text by a woman at GCSE (Elliot et al, 2020). After the workshop, Greta had gone home and 'did actually Google what percentage of people do texts written by a woman or a person of a different race' and was shocked to find it was 'near zero'. She said she had some ideas of the other texts studied at other schools through friends, but that it sounded like all schools were mostly teaching the same texts.

The questionnaires highlighted that while most students did enjoy studying the GCSE English Literature texts, fewer of them found them 'exciting and engaging.' Perhaps, this suggests that while students enjoy their English lessons and learning about the texts, they are less enthusiastic about the texts themselves. In my interviews, it became clear that many students were most interested in texts with stories that were engaging and interesting. In our interview, Jess touched on the difference between the diversity of the GCSE English Literature curriculum, compared to the breadth of texts studied at Key Stage 3. She felt it was 'a lot more diverse in Years 8 and 9',

mainly due to the inclusion of short stories. In contrast, she felt the GCSE texts were a little tiny group of not very diverse pieces of writing.’ Iris and Greta felt similarly, believing that Key Stage 3 was ‘way more diverse’.

While Ines felt learning about different perspectives was important during the workshop, when I asked her for more detail during our interview, she believed that the diversity of the writers studied should not be the most important thing. She felt that the most ‘important thing’ was the story and not the background of the person who wrote it. In their group interview, Harry, Leon and Tyler made a similar point to Ines. Leon felt that ‘It’s more about the story and not the background of the writer’ while Tyler and Harry ‘were not that bothered’ and didn’t feel the diversity of the writers ‘really mattered.’ While the Lit in Colour (2020) report found that young people valued a diverse range of texts on the curriculum, the findings from my research are less clear. It is understandable that students value the stories they are studying, because these help them understand the world, but this may be influenced by the demographic of the school which is predominantly white British (Cairney, 2004).

Time for change?

After taking part in the workshop, more students felt that the GCSE English Literature texts needed to change for future students, and I was interested to find out what students would like to see added during my interviews. I was especially interested in their responses to *Leave Taking*, that had been overwhelmingly positive in the questionnaires. For many students, they were pleased that the play was relatively modern. Nick felt that it was important to see how literature ‘developed’, and it was important to study a more modern text. While Daisy felt that the play ‘could have been written now’, Greta did point out that if a new text was going to be introduced, it should ‘be actually modern’ and from ‘this century.’ She pointed out that currently, while in History they go up to the late 1980s in their study of the Cold War, it was strange that other than the poetry, the most modern text in English they study is set in the Edwardian era. The literature

suggests that this may be the case in most schools, because even when there are modern texts on offer, schools continue to teach post-war *An Inspector Calls* which highlights the need for teachers to be given the time, space and resources to modernise their curriculum to suit the students they teach (DfE, 2013; Ngussa and Makewa, 2014; Kennedy, 2014; de Peyer, 2014; Bron et al, 2016; Pearson, 2017; AQA 2019; Elliot et al, 2020; Iffah, 2020). Greta did not understand why no modern texts were studied at GCSE and brought up the Power and Conflict poetry anthology, arguing that the poems were the first time she had felt that ‘this makes sense to me, this is a conflict I can relate to.’

Attitudes to *Leave Taking*:

In the interviews, where students were given the chance to expand on the views they had given in the questionnaires, a more varied picture of how much they had enjoyed the play arose. In the workshop Greta had already questioned whether the play presented a ‘stereotypical’ version of life as an immigrant and compared it to a ‘sitcom’. Greta’s point is important to consider when there is so little room in English at Key Stage 4 for teachers to teach texts that are by women and non-white writers. Within the current system, few students will get to study a breadth of literature from writers of diverse backgrounds, so we have a responsibility to ensure that the presentation of these communities is respectful, accurate and does not stereotype.

Jess and Ines were also not convinced that the play would be the best addition to the curriculum. In comparison to the Shakespeare play they study, with its ‘different plots’ which makes it ‘interesting to study’, they felt *Leave Taking* was too ‘character driven’. They felt there ‘wasn’t much of a story’ and Jess argued ‘like I think, if you’re going to put new texts in, it would be good to make them interesting and engaging for students. I’m not sure *Leave Taking* was the best example of that.’ This conversation was an important reminder that for the teenagers studying the GCSE English Literature texts, while they may worry about the diversity of the offering, they also care about being introduced to gripping and exciting stories This also clearly highlights the

importance of going beyond providing students with questionnaires, because this level of nuance in the discussion would have been impossible to gather from only quantitative data.

On the other hand, Mark and Rachel discussed how they liked how ‘in depth’ the characters were and ‘all the different characters’ perspectives and ideas on their similar situation.’ Mark discussed how he enjoyed how each character had a ‘different’ voice whereas Rachel focused on getting to explore how the characters coped ‘living in a world that doesn’t really appreciate different cultures very much.’ Tyler, Harry and Leon also enjoyed the play, but focused more on how it would practically be a good fit for study at GCSE. Harry had already mentioned the need to make sure any diverse texts that were added to the curriculum were ‘short’ in the workshop and he felt that it would be ‘easy to learn’ and ‘easy to understand’ as a play. Mark also believed it was an accessible play to study ‘cos it had easy to understand like key points’ and ‘overarching themes.’ For Tyler and Rachel, the play would be rich for analysis because it had lots of ‘symbolism’; a limited cast of characters; only two settings and was open to interpretation, so it would be ‘easy to expand on.’ Although I agree with Robinson and Taylor (2007) that the aims of student voice should go beyond focusing on academic outcomes, it is important to remember that for the students in our Year 10 and Year 11 classes, academic outcomes are central to their study of any GCSE subject, and their academic needs must remain a priority when making any curriculum changes.

What do students want to see on the GCSE English Literature curriculum?

My interview with Rachel and Mark was interesting when I asked them what they would like to see added to the English Literature GCSE curriculum because it highlighted the vast interests of those in our classrooms, and the difficulty of finding texts that will be interesting to all students, especially at a national scale. Rachel is a high-achieving girl who reads a lot out of school who said she was unsure because the ‘things I read are quite deep and wouldn’t be very appropriate for classrooms’ (she went on to talk about Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and philosophy). Similarly, Mark

talked about how he would personally like to study more 'non-fiction' but that he realised any text needs to be 'viable'. However, students understand that it is impossible to find a text that is age appropriate; suitable for the demands of the GCSE exam and represents the myriads of different backgrounds students in the modern classroom come from. However, we can help create a sense of belonging by responding to students' feedback on the curriculum when we can to show them, they are valued and to create an alignment of values (St-Amand et al, 2007).

Conclusion

What are students' views on student voice within school?

The literature on this area makes it clear how complex implementing student voice effectively can because it involves complex power dynamics; requires a large investment of time and a long-term commitment. Student voice has fallen from fashion in the last decade, and this may be because schools simply do not have the time to implement it in a way that is beneficial to students and staff.

While I believe student voice has its merits, with students being key stakeholders within schools who have a unique perspective, my research has highlighted the issues with student voice when it is not implemented effectively. Despite my sample including many students who belong to demographics most likely to be able to successfully participate in student voice, most students felt that student voice within school was inauthentic because it focused on issues that were unimportant to them and they did not see it contributing to change.

If schools wish to use student voice, they need to be willing to engage with the feedback students give them, even if this feedback is uncomfortable or does not match preconceived ideas. While I am not suggesting that schools can implement all suggestions given by students, the process does need to be transparent. If schools cannot achieve this, they may be better to simply focus on staff making choices and communicating their reasoning with students, because students quickly become disengaged, and even resentful, if they feel student voice is an ineffective use of their time and is tokenistic.

However, I will take what I have learned about student voice into my new role as Curriculum Leader for English at a brand-new school. Because the school will be in the process of developing, and there is no pre-existing culture, I do believe student voice could be embedded effectively from the start. Teachers and leaders will also have to be open to change as the school

grows, and students' experiences will be central to this. The research on the relationship between English, personal response and creativity (as well as students' enthusiasm when it came to participating in my workshop) has also highlighted the integral relationship between English as a subject and the concept of voice. To truly engage with the subject we need to ensure students have the space and time to construct their own views on the texts they study so they can authentically voice them in oral and written form.

How do students respond to being included in discussions around curriculum change?

Overall, students reacted positively to be asked their views on curriculum change in English. From the interviews and questionnaires, it quickly became clear that these were not conversations students were accustomed to. However, even within my intervention, a one-day workshop, and short interviews, students were able to share and articulate their thoughts. This highlights that if this process was to become more embedded, it is likely students would grow in confidence when it came to speaking frankly to adults about their experiences of the curriculum. Possibly due to the age of my participants, they were able to understand the limitations of the system in which their teachers are developing a curriculum but were enthusiastic for change where it can be achieved.

Due to negative or minimal experience with student voice, not all students were convinced that their feedback would result in any tangible change. The reality is that may be correct, especially as I will be leaving my current school at the end of the academic year. I have collaborated with the new Key Stage 4 Coordinator, sharing students' responses to *Leave Taking* and their feelings about the current curriculum, but any changes are now up to her and my Curriculum Leader. I was open about the challenges of implementing new texts that arose in the research, many of which match our anecdotal experience of trying to implement change in a large department in the current educational climate. Ideologically there is agreement about the importance of decolonising the curriculum, with changing the modern text being a place to do this at Key Stage

4, but understandably there are concerns about limited resources, time to develop subject knowledge and resistance from others in the department.

All teachers want the best for their students, and it is therefore understandable that departments continue to teach texts such *An Inspector Calls* when teachers have a proven track record of results with this text. Teachers are under pressure when it comes to results, and teachers know these results open doors for their students, so some might believe it is not worth the risk. However, this is limiting for students and possibly means some teachers are becoming de-skilled as they are teaching the same few texts for the entirety of their careers (with younger teachers having studied these texts in their own GCSEs).

As some researchers warn in the literature, there are issues with single teachers advocating for and trying to implement student voice. Not only is it time-consuming, but as in my case, when that teacher leaves, so does the work done on student voice. As mentioned, I hope my new school will benefit from my research, but it is less likely that any of my work will continue at my current school. As part of collaborating on this project, I have shared my findings with TLR holders within the English department who are keen to work on using student voice to understand students' experiences of English and the English curriculum at all key stages, but at this point, it is unlikely to influence other departments.

Did being involved in a student voice project about a new English Literature text impact students' sense of belonging?

As discussed, school belonging is complex and impacted by many factors, each of which is likely to impact students in different ways. Students did generally seem to feel like they belonged in school, due to factors such as friendship groups and relationships with teachers, which made it challenging to ascertain whether the intervention itself impacted their sense of belonging.

However, in interviews students were willing to share that they felt the presentation of, or absence of minority groups, within the texts they studied was sometimes problematic. While my research suggests that text choice is unlikely to substantially impact student belonging, the literature consistently highlighted the vital role school belonging plays in students' academic success and their social development.

Consequently, it is important that we consider how the choices we make in schools impact school belonging. While changing one GCSE text is unlikely to impact school belonging, it may signal to students that their teachers are considering their backgrounds and experiences and facilitate important conversations. Currently, there is almost no research into the relationship between school belonging and curriculum and it may be an area worth more consideration. As I move towards my new role, I hope to have greater freedom to implement these texts because I will be able to avoid some of the obstacles that make these changes challenging for schools and departments. The school is new so will be investing in new texts anyway; schemes of learning will need to be developed and teachers may be more open to teaching new texts after not teaching GCSE for a few years.

What can be learned about students' perspectives on the current English Literature texts and a new GCSE English Literature text through student voice?

Each student is an individual, so even within the small group of students who took part in my intervention, there was a range of views on the current English Literature texts and *Leave Taking*. It is understandable that the high-pressure nature of GCSEs meant that students focused on the need for texts to be accessible and practical. But it was also interesting that students focused on the importance of stories that engaged them and characters they could relate to; a reminder that stories are how we understand the world around us.

However, many students were open to change and appeared to value the importance of diversity in the curriculum, viewing the current offering as limited. Our classrooms are becoming more

diverse, so the need for students to experience texts written by writers from a range of backgrounds will only become more pertinent. My discussions with students also functioned as an important reminder that diversity goes beyond race because students had an appetite for more texts written by women and LGBTQ+ writers, and texts with characters that positively represent these groups. While we will never be able to positively represent the myriads of identities of students in the curriculum, this does not mean we should not try to diversify our offer.

While many students felt *Leave Taking's* handling of themes such as race, belonging and identity was important and interesting, I believe real progress will be made when texts by writers of colour are included on exam specifications, and do not have to deal with these themes. It is important that all students are given the opportunity to explore the canon and culturally significant literature such as Shakespeare and Dickens, but we have a responsibility to counterbalance the dated, and often negative portrayals of minority groups in these texts, with stories of celebration, joy and success on the curriculum. As I move to my new role and have control over a new Key Stage 3 English curriculum, I have actively tried to address this by selecting a fundamentally hopeful novel for Year 7 that is written by a female, British-Muslim author, with a young, female, Muslim protagonist. As well as impacting the text choices I will make as I design my new curriculum, this research has provided me with the evidence to advocate for these texts and a decolonised curriculum with leaders and my department. My findings, and the literature, will also support me in combating the challenges of these changes.

Students also desired texts that were modern, and although what modern means is debatable, it is understandable that students want to study a full text written in their lifetime. However, the only way this will be achieved is if exam boards regularly update the texts on offer. But this would require all parties, including exam boards, the government, publishers, companies who create

resources and schools to work together to ensure teachers have the time, resources and expertise to implement new texts successfully.

But even if these changes are made, until texts like *An Inspector Calls*, are removed, it seems unlikely that many schools will teach the new texts being offered. With the current financial crisis facing schools (making it high-risk to invest in new texts); issues with workload (teachers not having time to invest in creating new resources) and the recruitment and retention crisis (minimising the subject expertise within departments) this is understandable. However, until schools start teaching these new texts, in a capitalist society, private companies are not going to invest in creating resources for these texts. We need to break this vicious cycle for the benefit of the students in our class, but currently, teachers are obviously unwilling to take these risks in case it impacts student outcomes.

While the scale of my case study research means the findings cannot be applied to other groups, I believe my research did explore some issues that were rarely discussed in the literature. While there is a wealth of literature on student voice (although little of it focuses on how student can be implemented in a post-2010 education system) little research has investigated students' perceptions of the GCSE English Literature curriculum or the curriculum more generally. Significant changes have been made to the education system and curriculum in the last decade, and yet, as Brown and Woods (2022) highlight, students have had little opportunity to share their views on these changes. With a new Labour government recently elected, more changes may be on the horizon, and it seems vital that students' views on what they are being taught in schools are considered within the conversation. Although the timescale of my research limited the time I could spend developing students' trust and confidence in the process of using student voice to explore curriculum choices, students' response was overwhelmingly positive, which suggests there is a willingness and enthusiasm for this form of student voice amongst students, despite its remaining a 'largely forbidden' topic within student voice (Fielding, 2001, p101).

While I acknowledge that my project was unable to address the limited research into the experiences of disadvantaged students and students from minority backgrounds when it comes to student voice because of the clear ethical issues around the targeting of these groups and the voluntary nature of participation in the project, I was able to begin to explore whether the GCSE texts impact school belonging. From the small amount of data I gathered, I can draw no definite conclusions, but I do believe that the impact of the texts students' study at GCSE (including the representation of women, people of colour, the working class and those from the LGBTQ+ community) is an area worthy of further exploration.

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Appendices:**Appendix 1: Data****Pre-Workshop Questionnaire**

Theme	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
School Belonging	1. I feel like I am part of my school.	1	11	0	0
	2. I feel close to people at my school.	4	8	0	0
	3. I feel a sense that I personally belong to my school.	2	9	1	0
	4. I think what I learn in English will help me when I leave school.	2	9	1	0
	5. The GCSE English Literature texts make me feel like I belong.	0	5	7	0
Student Voice	1. I get lots of opportunities to share my thoughts and feelings at school.	2	7	3	0
	2. I think adults at my school value my thoughts and feelings.	2	5	7	0
	3. I believe that if I share my thoughts and feelings about school, they will be acted upon.	0	4	8	0

	4. I believe students can change and influence how things are done at my school.	0	8	4	0
	5. I believe I have influence over what I am taught in school.	1	4	7	0
Attitudes to GCSE English Literature texts	1. I enjoy studying the GCSE English Literature texts.	3	6	3	0
	2. I think we study a diverse range of writers (race, gender, sexuality and religion).	3	5	4	0
	3. I think the GCSE English Literature texts are exciting and engaging.	1	4	7	0
	4. I think the GCSE English Literature texts should stay the same for future students.	1	4	7	0
	5. I think the GCSE English Literature texts deal with issues that are important to young people today.	2	5	5	0

Post-Workshop Questionnaire

Theme	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
School Belonging	1. I feel like I am part of my school.	10	2	0	0
	2. I feel close to people at my school.	4	7	1	0
	3. I feel a sense that I personally belong to my school.	0	11	1	0
	4. I think what I learn in English will help me when I leave school.	4	8	0	0
	5. The GCSE English Literature texts make me feel like I belong.	2	6	4	0
Student Voice	1. I get lots of opportunities to share my thoughts and feelings at school.	1	8	3	0
	2. I think adults at my school value my thoughts and feelings.	1	8	3	0
	3. I believe that if I share my thoughts and feelings about school, they will be acted upon.	0	7	5	0
	4. I believe students can change and	1	5	6	0

	influence how things are done at my school.				
	5. I believe I have influence over what I am taught in school.	0	8	2	2
Attitudes to GCSE English Literature texts	1. I enjoy studying the GCSE English Literature texts.	3	8	1	0
	2. I think we study a diverse range of writers (race, gender, sexuality and religion).	1	6	5	0
	3. I think the GCSE English Literature texts are exciting and engaging.	3	6	3	0
	4. I think the GCSE English Literature texts should stay the same for future students.	2	3	7	0
	5. I think the GCSE English Literature texts deal with issues that are important to young people today.	2	4	6	0
Thoughts on Leave Taking	1. I have enjoyed studying Leave Taking.	6	6	0	0
	2. I think Leave Taking would be a suitable text to study for GCSE English Literature.	8	4	0	0

	3. Leave Taking deals with issues that are relevant to young people today.	7	5	0	0
	4. Leave Taking offers something different than the other texts we study for GCSE English Literature	10	2	0	0
	5. I found the characters in Leave Taking interesting and engaging.	4	6	1	1
Thoughts on the Workshop	1. I believe the opinions I have given today will be listened to and acted upon.	3	7	2	0
	2. I enjoyed being asked my opinion on the English Literature Curriculum.	5	7	0	0
	3. Being involved with today's session has made me feel more actively involved in my learning.	6	6	0	0
	4. I would like to be asked about my thoughts and feelings about the curriculum in other subjects.	5	7	0	0
	5. Taking part in today's workshop has made me think that my thoughts and	2	8	2	0

	feelings are valued by the school.				
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Appendix 2: Example of Coding Log

Short Description	Diversity of texts
Detailed Description	Discussion about the amount of diversity in the GCSE English Literature texts (including gender, race and sexuality).
Inclusion Criteria	Mention of how different groups (including women, minority ethnic groups and LGBTQ+ people) are represented within the English Literature curriculum, either as writers or characters.
Exclusion Criteria	Anything that does not focus on the diversity of the writers and/or characters in the texts studied within the English curriculum.
Typical Exemplars	'Lots of the texts we learn are written by white men.'
"Close, but no"	'The texts we study aren't very modern and I think this would make them more relatable.'

Short Description	Plot and engagement
Detailed Description	Discussion about how interesting and engaging students find the current GCSE English Literature texts they study or the new text they explored.
Inclusion Criteria	Discussion of how interesting and engaging students find the plot and characters of the texts they study or the new text they explored.
Exclusion Criteria	Anything that does not refer to how interesting and engaging students find the plot and characters of the texts they study or the new text they explored.
Typical Exemplars	'The plot of Leave Taking was not very exciting, so I don't know if people would like studying it.'
"Close, but no"	'Leave Taking was written by a young black playwright, so that makes it more relatable.'

Appendix 3: Example Coding

3. Do you think you get to study a diverse range of texts in English? Does it matter?

R – I think, I think we have a pretty good curriculum. We learn a decent range of things. But it's nice that we can be heard if we have suggestions, and that there, there might be changes to the um, curriculum.

M – I think some of the books we learn about are a bit out of date and it would be nice to, um, see some changes, such as having the book that we learned about.

R – And, um, Merchant of Venice for example is quite anti-Semitic and has some misogynistic undertones. Um, I think it is important we learn about those things whilst being taught that it's not appropriate. But also, it would be nice to have changes. Like, have a protagonist really dealing with those things rather than just writing them into the story.

4. What would you like to see added to the curriculum?

R – Um, I don't know, a lot of the things I read are quite deep and wouldn't be very appropriate for classrooms. Like philosophy. Like, we aren't going to pick up *The Bell Jar*. Um, I think, I don't really have any suggestions.

M – I mean yeah, I would prefer to have some more non-fiction, but at the end of the day, y'know, it's all about whether or not it would be viable for GCSE.

R – The Picture of Dorian Gray could be alright for us, it's not terribly out of date and has certain topics.

5. What were your thoughts on Leave Taking?

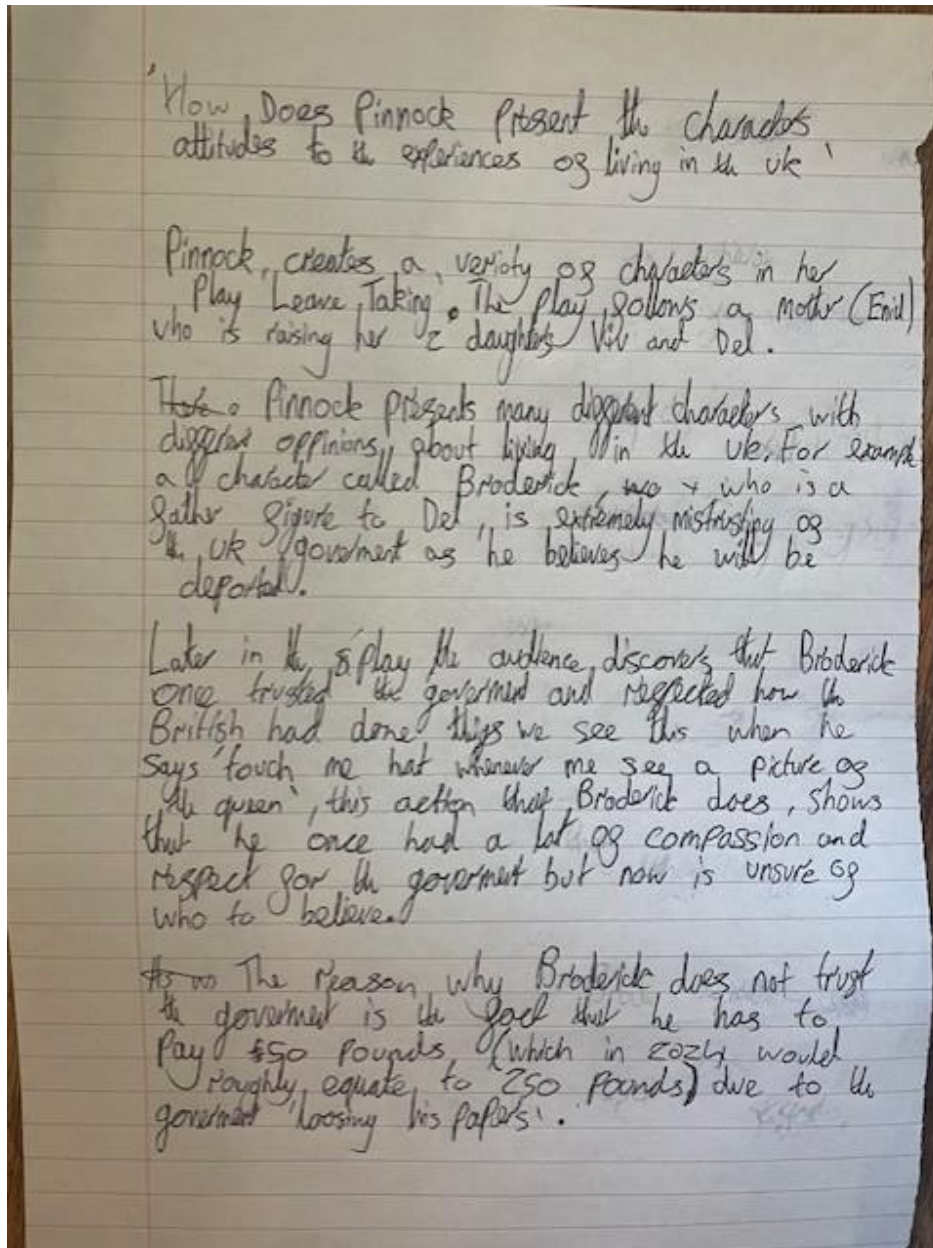
R – I really like it. I liked the topics and all the different characters' perspectives and ideas on their similar situation. With coping, and um...and living in a world that doesn't really appreciate different cultures very much.

M – I liked how umm, in depth the characters were. So like, each character was different in their own right and it wasn't just the same, um, like way of writing for all of them. Like some of them were hating against the system and some of them agreed with it.

6. How did you find the experience of being involved with the project?

R – I really liked it. I think we handled a lot of important topics and ideas about it. It was useful. And, we covered character characters, the topics, all the key terms we didn't understand at the start, to clear everything up and have complete context was important, I liked that.

Appendix 4: Example Student Work



Rinock clearly implies that Broderick feels proud about living in the UK, in order to highlight the ~~great~~ gratitude that people ~~feel~~ from the Windrush generation feel to be able to live in the UK. After Broderick finishes arguing ~~as~~ about the government towards him, he states ~~the responses~~ "Till them change they mind again" and "This is my home." The use of the phrase "change they mind" gives us the impression that Broderick is used to not being able to stick to one place for a long period of time; he is concerned to do what the government tells him. The noun "home" celebrates the fact that he can feel some sense of warmth and hope in a place where he isn't ~~all~~ able to always make his own decisions for his life. The phrases as a whole reflects the struggle that some people can have in order to be able to live in a country without being discriminated against. This can make the reader feel upset because we don't always understand ~~the~~ how hard it is to fit in with a community that we have lived with for most of our life. Consequently, it appears that Broderick feels betrayed by the government because later on in his life, he realised that he has to pay to live in Britain.

Pinnock clearly uses the character of Viv to portray the how 2nd generation immigrants can appear to be assimilated successfully but are actually struggling to find a place to thrive in the UK. Pinnock describes how Viv was 'searching' for herself in books but found she was 'never there'. This highlights the lack of representation in British education and culture. There were mainly white teachers and writers in the 1980s and the Britain failed to branch out and find snowax a diverse ~~flexibility~~ teachers and writers. The 'searching' has connotations of desperation ~~and~~ which shows how hard she's tried to find herself ~~and~~ but never could. Viv talks with her mother ~~or how she wants to~~ and ~~or~~ wants to go out to Jamaica ~~and~~ 'help for a year and help out where they need'. Viv has the opportunity to embrace her freedoms in British society and leave and come back for university. Viv's mother (Enid) doesn't want her to go as she had risked everything to give her children a good life and she believes Viv is wasting time that could be spent on an education. Consequently, it appears that Viv experiences a disconnect from her education and feels as though to find the representation she needs to go to Jamaica and explore her heritage. It shows the reader the difficulties of being a 2nd generation immigrant and not being able to find a place to belong.

Appendix 5: Sample Sections from Workshop Booklet on *Leave Taking*

What do you already know about these events, ideas and time periods?

-

The Colonial Caribbean

-

-

The Windrush Generation

-

-

Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech

-

-

Britain in the 1980s

-

-

Black Youth Culture in Britain

-

-

The New Cross Fire

-

-

Obeah Practices

-

-

Matriarchy

-

-

-

-

Scene Six

Enid has visited Mai for another reading, and the scene begins at the end of the appointment. Enid is weary and tells Mai that Del has run away from home and that she has not seen her in weeks. Mai reassures her that Del will be alright. Enid questions whether she has been a good mother to Del and worries she has let her down. She worries Del will destroy her own life and recalls a shameful incident when Del was caught shoplifting.

Enid tells Mai she has not been sleeping, feels guilty for not sending more money home and blames herself for her mum's death. They discuss the choices they made to leave Jamaica to give their children a better life. Enid talks about the struggles of being a single parent and Mai gives her something to help her sleep before she leaves.

Del enters Mai's room and Mai tells Del he is tired of obeah and finished with it. Mai feels guilty and tells Del to leave and return home. Del protests, saying Enid hates her. Mai shares that she

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feels being too hard on her son caused their estrangement and encourages Del to make amends with Enid. Del leaves to go for a walk.

Key Moment:

MAI: I was hard on my boy. I didn't hate him. I was trying to save him. He used to tell me how he never feel even a little bit British. He used to go on and on at me – in a cockney accent. He would never rest, always dreaming about escape, turning it round and round in him mind. But where the hell he going to escape to?

What does this show about different experiences of the parents and children in the play?

How is the theme of family explored?