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Racist epithets in the classroom: Unpacking attitudes to the N-word in teaching English

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Abstract

Since 2020, there has been a growing discussion around the representation of Black lives in the curriculum, and their representation in the classroom. There is a need to examine the ways in which texts are taught in the context of race and empire. In a classroom context, which is concerned with teaching language as well as literature, racial epithets are a topic of analysis and discussion, but also carry the potential for harm for teachers and students of colour (Oluo, 2019). Drawing on data collected in a survey of secondary English teachers in England and Scotland in 2020–2021, this paper explores data relating to teachers' handling of the N-word when it appears in classroom texts. One hundred thirty-three respondents taught a novel containing the N-word. Respondents were asked to describe how they handled the N-word in the classroom, how students responded and how comfortable they were with this approach. Participants related choosing to read the word aloud, not to voice it, or to have classroom discussions to decide which approach to take. Respondents emphasised the need to directly address the word and its context, no matter what their decision on the word itself. The findings are reflected on through the lens of Inoue's (2020) anti-racist reading framework.

Key words: race, racist epithets, Whiteness, teaching literature

Introduction

Since the murder of George Floyd in early 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and the United Kingdom, there has been a growing discussion around the representation of Black lives in the curriculum and their representation in the classroom. Along with calls for the diversification of texts for young people, seen in the CLPE's Reflecting Realities reports (beginning in 2017) and the Penguin/Runnymede Trust Lit in Colour campaign, there is also a need to examine the ways in which existing texts are taught in the context of race and empire. In a classroom context, which is concerned with teaching language as well as literature, racial epithets are a topic of analysis and discussion, but also carry the potential for harm for teachers and students of colour (Oluo, 2019). One source, written in the context of US university education, has described quoting the N-word as 'the new taboo' (Kennedy and Volokh, 2021).

There is very little research on race talk ('inherently risky dialogue about race and racism', Williams et al., 2016, p. 16) and specifically the N-word in the secondary English classroom, particularly outside the United States. However, there are plenty of canonical curricular texts that evoke the topic of racism, and teachers must decide how to address that within the classroom, with little guidance or research to support their choices (Borsheim-Black, 2015). Some research has shown that even where teachers espouse anti-racist intentions, they still see racism as a personal rather than a structural phenomenon (Schuman and Reynolds, 2023). In England English teachers are unlikely to have had training on how to talk about race in the classroom (Elliott et al., 2021), although there is a sense recently that more explicit dialogue is occurring in this arena. This paper seeks to contribute to the research literature and more precisely to offer some guidance drawn from analysis of practice around the voicing of the N-word in secondary English classrooms in England and Scotland.

The filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word

The N-word has a lengthy history of use as a racist slur; going back at least to the first third of the 19th century (Kennedy, 1999). Its history is particularly an American one, and it has been variously described as 'the most troubling word in our language' (Hinckley, 2002); 'six simple letters that convey centuries of pain, evil and contempt' (Monroe, 2007, p. 198); and 'the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language' (Darden, quoted in Margolick, 1995). Its use is, in and of itself, an act of racial violence, and the reason that

> *[The n-word] yields such responses is that it is a notorious slur that has long been used to demean, insult, intimidate, and terrorize African Americans. It often accompanies horrific racist violence.* (Kennedy and Volokh, 2021, p. 6)

Significantly, the N-word *is* different from other racial slurs and terminology used for other races, offensive though they may be. 'Not all words are equally powerful because not all words have the same history' (Oluo, 2019, p. 132).

In 2020, around the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the United Kingdom, there was an increasing amount of attention paid to the most prominent example of a text featuring a Black character taught in the UK curriculum, *Of Mice and Men*, which remained one of the most widely taught texts in England's schools (Kneen et al., 2022) despite having been removed from GCSE specifications in reforms in 2015. At that time, there were a number of discussions on social media about the experiences of (Black) school students who had been disciplined for reacting to (White) teachers voicing the N-word in the classroom. Muna Abdi talked about her niece who challenged a white teacher for nonchalantly saying the N-word. The teacher felt 'threatened' and 'disrespected' by the students' challenge (Abdi, 2020). Others voiced experiences similar to that of Essien:

> *I grew up in a small city in the East of England and I was the only Black kid in my primary schools and one of two Black kids (at most) in my class all through high school. When we studied* Of Mice of Men *in high school, there was no care taken over the use of the n-word. Somehow there's a pass when it comes to racial slurs in literature. The author wrote it and so we were all allowed to say it: end of story. And so I and the only other Black kid in my English class had to listen to our white teacher and our white classmates say that word countless times.* (Essien, 2020, np).

She reflects further that 'once the word was out there, it was open season' (Essien, 2020, np). The issue here is the validation in the classroom of an injurious word that is used in racist bullying incidents outside the classroom. The violence of the word for young Black people is nothing new. Because every literature teacher should take the opportunity to quote Langston Hughes when they can, here he reflects similar sentiments about the language that permeated childhood games:

> *Misery is when you start to play a game and someone begins to count out 'Eenie, meenie, minie mo …'* (Hughes, 1994 [1969], p. 28).

The very limited research that has been done which considers the voicing of the N-word in the classroom links the ability of classes to have serious and appropriate discussion about race to the presence of psychological safety. Williams et al. (2016) imply the power sharing of the teacher who entrusts students with the decision of voicing or not of the word increases the level of psychological safety in the classroom.

To say or not to say

Kennedy and Volokh sum up one side of the argument that people who oppose the use of the N-word 'maintain that giving voice to those epithets is so hurtful to some that no pedagogical aim is worth the pain inflicted' (Kennedy and Volokh, 2021, p. 8). They themselves argue that 'Omitting them veils or mutes an ugliness that, for maximum educational impact, and indeed for maximum candor, ought to be seen or heard directly. And omitting them sends the message to students that they should talk around offensive facts' (Kennedy and Volokh, 2021, p. 9). In the context of their practice of teaching law, they argue that 'accurately and directly quoting source material is sound pedagogy—not just something we have a right to do, but itself the right thing to do' (p. 11). They write the epithets in question in full throughout their article. Kennedy (1999) also suggests that there should be no distinction made between the appropriateness of the word being used by a White or a Black person, on the basis that without a compelling argument to the contrary, 'We ought to reject racial distinction-making on that basis in order to inculcate a habit for seeing people more carefully as distinctive, particular, sovereign individuals as opposed to predetermined agents or subjects of this or that racial group' (p. 92).

These arguments will be reflected in the data in this study. It is also worth noting that that Kennedy and Volokh work in the context of university teaching of law and also that they justify their position with reference to the practice of lawyers and judges in quoting source material, a very different context from the English secondary classroom. Lester (2013) also uses the word when discussing his first year college course on the 'anatomy' of the N-word and notes that in his classes, where they have agreed as a class that they can use it in the context of studying it, some students say the word (as he does) and others euphemise it. He argues that 'Words are neutral. People and their experiences give them power to soothe or to attack' (2013, p. 19).

Bernard, a Black professor of African-American literature, reflecting on the use of the N-word in the classroom, reminds her students that just because a

person will not say the word out loud, 'that doesn't mean that person is not a racist' (Bernard, 2005, p. 51). Her article largely argues for the need to be able to say the word aloud when analysing literature, talking about texts that have the word in the title, but it is also a meditation on the emotive threat of the word and in particular her relationship with her White students. To some extent, as she acknowledges, she is speaking from a position of relative power as the professor, though she also touches on the differing levels of privilege (and therefore power) afforded to her and her White colleagues and students.

Speaking to the question of whether or not the word should be spoken, Oluo asks powerfully:

> *Why would a well-meaning white person want to say these words in the first place? Why would you want to invoke that pain on people of color? Why would you want to rub in the fact that you are privileged enough not to be impacted by the legacy of racial oppression that these words helped create?* (Oluo, 2019, p. 134)

This is a more general prohibition which does not speak to the specific context of finding the N-word in a classroom text, but it does speak particularly to White people.

English's whiteness problem

The vast majority of English teachers in the United Kingdom are White (as am I), and Whiteness permeates the ways in which we design, teach and assess English literature in both the United Kingdom and across the Anglophone world. Recent works have acknowledged and explored this, largely in the north American context, such as *Reckoning With the Whiteness of English Education* (Badenhorst et al. (2023), or the more teacher-oriented *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* (Emdin, 2016). In a fascinating case study of a single class study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* Borsheim-Black (2018) identifies the challenges presented by a Discourse of Whiteness within the classroom as individuals seek to present themselves as not-racist, while negotiating some of the problematic racial ideologies within the text. She notes that despite the success of the teacher in managing to negotiate an anti-racist approach, 'business as usual in traditional literature curriculum and instruction both reinforced problematic racial ideologies and made interrupting the status quo challenging' (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 420). Concerns about appearing racist create a barrier to race talk in the classroom (Sue, 2013; Tropp and Rucinski, 2022). Several studies have demonstrated a mismatch between White teachers' beliefs about their practices in relation to anti-racist pedagogies or being 'good' teachers of Black students, and what research shows good culturally relevant or anti-racist teaching actually is (e.g., Hyland, 2005; Schuman and Reynolds, 2023) and others offer specific praxes for White teachers to enable anti-racist teaching (Daniels and Hebard, 2018). Toliver and Hadley (2021) document the inability of a group of White pre-service teachers to imagine an anti-racist English education. The dominance of Whiteness in English, both the subject and its teachers, presents a key challenge for appropriate decisions to be made in the classroom around race talk in general, and the voicing of the N-word in particular. As Nelson-Addy (2021) notes, there are different challenges relating to discussion of race and racism (and by extension, decisions around racial epithets) depending on the racialisation of the teacher as White or Black, and the ethnic and racial make-up of their class. To understand those challenges and make appropriate decisions requires a level of racial literacy, defined by Skerrett as 'an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups' (Skerrett, 2011, p. 314).

Methodology

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from the responses to a survey of secondary English teachers in England and Scotland (volunteer sample $n = 254$) on ethnic diversity in English curricula in the United Kingdom. The survey was open from summer 2020 to summer 2021, shortly after the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and United Kingdom, for a calendar year. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (approval number ED-CIA-20-226). As well as substantive questions, some demographic questions were asked; participants were asked to give their racial identity as White, Black or mixed race, or other global ethnic majority (GEM).

In the academic year they answered the survey, 133 respondents taught *Of Mice and Men* ($n = 117$), *Anita and Me* ($n = 6$) or another novel containing the N-word ($n = 50$). Respondents were asked to describe how they handled the N-word in the classroom, how students responded and how comfortable they were with this approach. One hundred fifty-six (of whom 136 were White) respondents answered this question, including those who had taught the texts previously but were not currently teaching them. Responses to this question, and additional material from questions asking about teachers' level of comfort discussing issues of race, were inductively coded for whether the N-word was voiced in the classroom or not, and for the reasons teachers gave for these choices.

Quotations are given verbatim, except where evident typos interrupt the reading. I have left their choices around capitalisation of White and Black; in the surrounding text, I capitalise White to acknowledge that Whiteness is as much a social construction as Blackness.

Positionality

It is relevant here to state that I am White, and also that I concur with Tanner that 'race is a white problem' (Tanner, 2019, p. 182, pace Richard Wright). I understand 'identity as a complex and multidimensional social–historical construction that should not be reduced or essentialized to one of its characteristics or dimensions' (Jupp, Berry & Lensmire, 2016, p. 1154) but I also concur with them that:

> *Whiteness, as definition, refers to hegemonic racial structurings of social and material realities operating in the present moment that perpetuate racialized inequalities and injustices. White identity, as definition, refers to the multiple, intersecting, and (often) privileged race-evasive ways of conjugating White identities in the present moment.* (ibid.)

Because race is a White problem, it is extremely necessary for White people to do the work in considering our approaches to race in the classroom and questions such as the one examined in this paper. The curriculum which we teach in England is largely white (Elliott et al., 2021, 2024) and a largely White English teacher workforce has an inevitable influence on the norms of the classroom, and what is considered to be good practice. While the data in this study is drawn from teachers with varied racialisations, the ultimate recommendations are addressed to White teachers.

To voice or not to voice: How teachers handle racist epithets in texts

All responses were coded for whether they made it clear if the N-word was spoken out loud in their classroom or not (Table 1). The majority of participants in the survey who expressed a clear decision chose not to read the word aloud.

Among the teachers whose responses were coded as 'not voiced', several mentioned the use of recordings where the word was used—one mentioned a recording of a poem by Warsan Shire, and 2 mentioned the use of the audiobook of *Of Mice and Men* to avoid the word in class (one White, one Black/Mixed Race). A third teacher (White) mentioned that they had *stopped* using the audiobook of *Of Mice and Men* for this reason. Not voiced includes two instances where teachers report having a class discussion *in order to decide* that the word will not be spoken, i.e. where the class discussion was not a genuine democratic exercise. 8 teachers mentioned that their policy had changed recently to not speaking the word, because of student voice, and another said that it had changed because of parental complaints.

Table 1: Teachers' choices about how to handle the N-word by ethnicity.

	White (n = 136)	*Black/ mixed race (n = 12)*	*Other global majority (n = 8)*	*Total*
Not voiced	52	6	6	64
Read aloud	23	4	0	27
Class discussion	11	1	1	13
	86	11	7	104

Racial context matters

It became clear that the racial identity of both the teacher answering the question and of the students they were teaching was an important factor in how some participants thought about it. It is for this reason that quotations in this paper are tagged with the racial background of the writer, whether or not they have made it directly relevant in their comments. One participant related nuanced attitudes on the part of students (following the Black Lives Matter protests):

> *Students have responded reasonably to OMAM [*Of Mice And Men*] until this year- we have a number of black students (all female) becoming quite upset that they had a white teacher. I met with them all, spoke to parents and explained that the word is not read aloud by anybody, but is an important part of the text which is a piece of historical fiction. Their main issue was that a white person was the teacher and they felt this wasn't right- if I was teaching them, they'd feel more comfortable because I could have an understanding of the experience. We had a lot of talks, with parents, about how the BLM movement and things in the press have caused triggers to this sort of language and have discussed, as a department, moving this text to later in Y9 rather than starting the year with it.* (GEM; Not Voiced)

Although the pupil voice here was specifically around the choice of text, given that the decision not

to voice the word had already been taken, others noted a recent feeling that students were more ready to speak out.

> *It's interesting that this year some students of colour told us that they felt uncomfortable with the language and topic—previously we have not asked them and they have not said so.* (White; Not Voiced)

Another participant related prioritising the preferences of Black pupils in general, as the most affected group, in making the decision about voicing:

> *We say 'N' instead of the full word. This has seemed best. We decided upon this because of a colleague's experience teaching in a school with a large black community. Her students said that that would be what they would prefer.* (GEM; Not Voiced)

Notably the choice is rationalised via the expertise of experience, drawing on a different group of pupils altogether. Here the implied lack of Black pupils in the school context does not affect whether it is right or wrong to speak the word. In another context there is an implied racially diverse context of students, but no sense of pupil voice:

> *In my experience the students don't seem to mind (I realise they wouldn't tell me/it's unseen trauma etc.).* (White; Not Voiced)

This particular participant did not speak the word because of the whole department rule on its use, but they strongly disagreed with that rule, describing it as near 'censorship'. However, they also would prefer not to teach *Of Mice and Men* in the first place. Another teacher identifies the lack of input from anyone who might be affected by the word—they are 'very aware' of this lack—but nonetheless is comfortable with their decision:

> *I always read it out. We have a discussion beforehand about how offensive it is and how we should never use it. As I carefully prepare them beforehand, I have never come across a student who was shocked or upset by me saying the word. They all know it's a horribly offensive word and the fact that it is used in the book enables them to understand more fully the vitriol Crooks is subjected to. I am perfectly comfortable with this, but working in an all-white department, I am very aware that I don't have a perspective from any black teachers on this approach. Even so, I don't think there is a 'right' way to handle it—everyone is going to feel differently and it is hard to know sometimes if you're doing it in the most sensitive way possible.* (White: Read Aloud)

Here the participant draws not only on the literary question of its use and the effect it generates but also suggests that there is no right way to handle it (potentially defensively). Others were extremely forthright and decided in their beliefs about the moral question underlying the speaking or otherwise of the N-word, with more than one participant identifying their Whiteness as a specific reason why their view was of less importance than others.

> *As a woman racialised as white I will not under any circumstances say the n word aloud. I'm comfortable interrogating its use as long as there's also a conversation about the difference btw a white author and a black author using the word—and a white teacher and a black teacher! And as long as a white writer describing/defining ethnicity and using the n word, is not the only experience of Black representation that the students encounter!* (White; Not Voiced)

Here the teacher notes that not only is her racialisation (or the racialisation of the teacher in general) relevant to the choice to voice or not, but that the context of the author also needs to be addressed, a topic that will be elaborated on in the next section. Another teacher states 'As a black teacher I am not comfortable reading this word aloud' (Black; Not Voiced), suggesting it is not only White teachers who see their racialisation as underlying their practice choices.

Understanding the word in context and addressing it directly

A number of participants noted the importance of directly addressing the use of the N-word where it arose, pre-discussing it, and also distinguishing between contexts of use. These participants fell into all three categories of Not Voiced, Read Aloud or Class Discussion.

> *We refuse to say the N word as we feel that it legitimises the use of that word. We also teach around the context in order to highlight how it is being used to portray the racism of that time.* (Black; Not Voiced)

> *As an important reflection of (now, clearly abhorrent) attitudes, it is important that it is not covered up or sanitised. I don't think we should pretend that Literature was different just because it is exploring ideas or expressing attitudes we don't necessarily agree with. This is an opportunity to have these difficult discussions and confront aspects of life that don't necessarily fit in with what we believe or like to think.* (White; Class discussion)

> *We read it on paper and aloud—and we discuss the connotations and history of the word, allowing students a forum to express themselves and to discuss why it is a 'bad word'—if we don't, we are tabooing it and not educating them on the power of words and part of the history of race relations.* (White: Read Aloud)

This last participant's argument echoes that of Kennedy and Volokh (2021) but also makes the assumption that it is not possible to have the essential discussion around the word and educate students about it without speaking it aloud.

Some participants specifically linked the use of the N-word to authorial intent, again spread across the range of choices.

> *We explained that although it is an offensive word that was Steinbeck's purpose—he wanted readers to feel uncomfortable to highlight this prejudice.* (White; Class Discussion)

> *Changing it in the text felt like lessening the impact and discrimination suffered by Crooks* (White; Read Aloud)

> *I will always warn students of its impending use on the page, tell them we do not say the word out loud, give them the historical context of the word (not to justify its use, but to explain it), and differentiate between the story being told and the author's own beliefs.* (White; Not Voiced)

All three of these comments are on *Of Mice and Men*, to judge from their answers to the previous question about novels containing the N-word. It is interesting that there is a tension here between understanding the use of the word as 'historical' but that it is not a word expressing the author's own beliefs. Steinbeck, in his memoir *Travels With Charley* expresses quite clearly his views on attitudes towards African-Americans drawing on memories of childhood friends the Cooper family: 'When I heard, for example, that Negroes were an inferior race, I thought the authority was misinformed. When I heard that Negroes were dirty, I remembered Mrs. Cooper's shining kitchen' (Steinbeck, 1962 [1997], p. 218). He refers to his 'failings as a racist' (p. 219). The use of the N-word is clearly understood as offensive in the 1930s, given responses to Carl Van Vechten's 1926 novel, which used the word in its title. There is a sense that teachers want to pre-empt judgement of both text and author according to modern standards. Even those who think it should be read aloud are working from an assumption that the word itself is harmful.

Many of the different aspects of the arguments cited above collide in this participant's account:

> *As a black teacher I am not comfortable reading this word aloud. Although my teaching context is predominantly white I do have 2 black students in this class. I didn't know what their or the other students' level of context was around this word, so I made the decision to tell teach them the context of race relations in 1930s America but that we wouldn't say 'the N word's. Students accepted this, saying that they had black friends/cousins etc. and it felt weird. There was one incident when a very experienced teacher covered my class, but didn't know that I had this agreement with my class and said N****. The class were outraged, called her a racist. Naturally she was upset.* (Black; Not Voiced)

Historical context is brought into relevance here for understanding the text and its vocabulary, but also the sense of students being part of the reasoned discussion to arrive at a decision around the N-word. The dangers of a non-schoolwide approach are raised by this account, as the second teacher does not work on the same principles. The sense of judgement that use of the word is racist no matter the context is also raised, here not of the text and the author, but of the teacher.

An inescapable fact

The data suggest that practice was mixed in classrooms in 2020–2021, although a shift in attitudes was demonstrable at the time and that may have caused a further shift in practice since then. Choices over voicing or not voicing the N-word were largely reasoned and thought out, albeit with an occasional sense of post-hoc justification. The majority of teachers responding to the questionnaire did not report central decision making on this question. They did draw on their own racialisation, and that of their students, when considering whether the word would be spoken aloud in their classroom or not. With reference to Jupp, Berry and Lensmire's characterisation of Whiteness and White identity, participants were largely not unaware of their group membership and privileges (perhaps unsurprisingly given the focus of the survey) but they did evade responsibility and show some resistance, which Picower characterises as 'active protection' of the 'hegemonic story and White supremacy' (Picower, 2009, p. 197). Ironically, *Of Mice and Men* is an ideal text to examiner the concept of White identity operationalising White normativity in the service of racial hegemony: however low they fall, the labourers are still *not Crooks* and they look down on him. *Of Mice and Men* in particular has been the focus of these discussions in England, and because curriculum reform in the 2010s drove the text into the lower secondary years (because the books were in the cupboard already), the language has perhaps received even more

focus. It is my personal view that it is nearly impossible to teach the text and deal appropriately with the racism, sexism and ableism (Lawrence, 2020) in it, with 11–14 year olds. As time goes by and the physical copies fall apart, it will undoubtedly become less commonly taught. However, English teaching in the United Kingdom has not yet had its reckoning with Whiteness in the same way that it has begun to in the United States, and there is a sense within the data that such a reckoning is overdue.

Many teachers, on both sides of the debate, emphasised the importance of directly addressing the word, exploring its history and its impact with students, and why it is not a word which can be said outside the classroom, even if it is being used inside in reading from or analysing a text. It is evident that most teachers feel comfortable with the approach they have adopted towards the N-word, but it is also clear that this tends to be adopted on an individual basis with a small circle of discussion, and attitudes can change with a new input of information. There is also a strong sense that the use of the word causes harm to Black students, directly or indirectly, even if it is just disrupting their sense of school belonging, and this is acknowledged by many teachers.

Teachers acknowledge the harm, but think carefully about their position, feeling that it is essential to address the N-word directly when it arises in texts and to explore its history, educating students about the word itself. Multiple respondents in the survey showed an inescapable fact: it is possible to do these things *without* voicing the word itself.

What this does not mean is that any texts containing the word should be eliminated from classrooms, as evidenced by a recent case in Canada, relating to the works of Lawrence Hill, a Black author and professor of Creative Writing at the University of Guelph, who was told by an English teacher in Ontario that she was no longer allowed to teach his novel *The Book of Negroes* because it contained the N-word. In a piece for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper, Hill retorted:

> *I would remind administrators who ban such literature that their classrooms will prevent 16- and 17-year-old students from encountering seminal authors such as: James Baldwin (The Fire Next Time), David Chariandy (Brother), Esi Edugyan (Washington Black), Toni Morrison (Beloved), Angie Thomas (The Hate U Give), Alice Walker (The Color Purple), Colson Whitehead (The Underground Railroad) … Need I go on?Do you see a pattern?Each writer is Black.* (Hill, 2024, pO1)

Even worse than an outright ban is a 'whisper' ban (Hill, 2024) where the books are avoided without an explicit reason being given. If the intention is an anti-racist English curriculum which considers its own Whiteness openly, then making the word so taboo that we cannot encounter it, will not help to achieve that intention.

Ultimately, even acknowledging the arguments that we risk making the word taboo and rendering it impossible to fully explore its impact, such as those made by Bernard (2005), Kennedy (1999) and Kennedy and Volokh (2021), when speaking about secondary students as opposed to a tertiary context, those arguments do not hold water. Such analysis as needs to take place can take place without voicing the word, and indeed, it is clear from the data that even in classrooms where the word remains unspoken, its violence is felt by students. There is no justification, therefore, in the light of the harm it can do to Black students and staff, for the N-word to be read aloud by White students and staff in secondary English classrooms.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

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