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English teachers' journeys since the 2020 Iteration of Black Lives Matter

Adrian Fernandes

Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence
Adrian Fernandes, Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY, UK.
Email: adrian.fernandes@education.ox.ac.uk

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Abstract

The 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) mobilised students in England to demand greater representation of racially minoritised voices in English curriculums—a call highlighted by stark inequity: just 1.5% of GCSE texts studied are by racially minoritised authors, despite racially minoritised students comprising 38.0% of the student population. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT), I investigated how 11 secondary school English teachers responded. Through thematic analysis of interview data, aided by a visual timeline stimulus, I examined both the transformative possibilities and the institutional constraints that teachers encountered. Three key findings emerged. First, BLM acted as a definitive catalyst, igniting a pedagogical desire for change. Second, change was facilitated by specific opportunities: student activism, profound engagement with new texts, diverse classrooms and examination boards' expanded offerings. Third, teachers' journeys were curtailed by systemic barriers: canon-centric training, critical resource gaps and multifaceted institutional resistance. My study advances CRT in English education by mapping the mechanisms of exclusion that preserve the canon. I propose four evidence-based interventions: integrating CRT into teacher education; centralised funding for inclusive resources; embedding representation standards in Ofsted frameworks; and formalising student curriculum co-design. Ultimately, my research demonstrates that without institutional transformation, the disruptive potential of BLM remains unrealised, perpetuating the exclusionary dominance of the literary canon.

KEYWORDS
Black Lives Matter in education, diversifying English literature curriculums, structural barriers to inclusive pedagogy, teacher attitudes towards curriculum change

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

I examine the professional journeys of secondary school English teachers in England following the 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter (BLM), focusing on how teachers navigated pressures to diversify the curriculum and how their evolving practices were shaped, enabled and constrained by institutional, material and ideological conditions.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

My analysis reveals that BLM catalysed shifts in teachers' journeys, prompting critical reflection and experimentation with texts by racially minoritised authors. However, these journeys were systematically curtailed by canon-centric training, resource scarcity, institutional resistance and tokenistic inclusion, revealing how disruption was contained and the white literary canon preserved.

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) reignited student demands for anticolonial approaches to the English curriculum (Begum & Saini, 2019). These demands responded to a stark disparity in representation: in England, 38.0% of students are racially minoritised (GOV.UK, 2025a), yet only 1.5% of GCSE English literature students study texts by racially minoritised authors (Elliott et al., 2024). This inequity carries profound stakes, amplified because English, a compulsory core subject (GOV.UK, 2025b), operates as *de facto* citizenship education, a pedagogical project historically instituted through a closed canon to assimilate students into a selective national culture (Belas & Hopkins, 2019). English curriculums are reduced to direct instruction in linguistic norms and imposed interpretations of a fixed white canon (Hodgson & Harris, 2024), thereby naturalising whiteness as the dominant cultural standard (Leonardo, 2004).

At this juncture, between the disruptive force of BLM and the durable, exclusionary architecture of the canon, English teachers are positioned as the essential, yet paradoxical, agents of change. As the crucial mediators who operationalise text selection within a heavily prescribed and contested space (Elliott, 2020; Hodgson & Harris, 2024), they embody the core tension between the potential to 'teach Life' in its full diversity (Du Bois, 2014, p. 227) and the constraints of a system structured by assimilative logic. To investigate how they navigated this tension, I applied a Critical Race Theory (CRT)-inflected lens and adopted the term *racially minoritised*—centring the active process of *minoritisation*, the systemic relegation of authors and communities positioned as non-white within racialised structures (Omi & Winant, 2014). Through in-depth qualitative interviews incorporating a visual timeline

stimulus (Bagnoli, 2009), I traced the professional journeys of 11 English teachers in England from 2020 to 2024 to explore three dimensions of their post-BLM practice:

1. How did BLM change teachers' approaches to text selection and pedagogy?
2. What opportunities facilitated curricular diversification?
3. What systemic barriers impeded sustained change?

My analysis revealed a dual constraint. BLM acted as a powerful catalyst, creating a thirst for change and new permissiveness for diversification. This momentum was operationalised through specific opportunities: student activism, profound engagement with texts by racially minoritised authors and examination board provision of such texts. Yet, teachers' journeys were ultimately contained by a resilient system. This system functioned not only through the logic of the canon but also through its practical mechanisms: critical deficits in resources and training, institutional resistance and the relegation of racially minoritised authors to tokenistic, shorter texts. I argue that while BLM disrupted pedagogical norms for some, transforming that disruption into widespread equitable reform requires confronting both the ideological dominance of the canon *and* the institutional apparatus that sustains it.

My paper is structured to unpack this tension. First, I contextualise the exclusionary canon and teachers' position within it. Second, I detail my qualitative methodology. Third, I present findings on change, opportunities and barriers. Finally, I conclude by analysing these barriers as a mechanism of containment and propose transformative interventions. By centring teacher narratives, I map the fragile agency of teachers navigating a moment of disruptive potential within an exclusionary system.

BLM, CRT AND THE CANON

The 2020 BLM movement mobilised students to demand curriculum reform, protesting the systemic marginalisation of texts by racially minoritised authors (Gibson, 2020; Mohdin et al., 2020) and pressuring schools to make diversity statements (Ahmed, 2020; Bristow, 2020). Students recognised how curricular exclusion perpetuates narratives with real-world consequences, reinforcing the dehumanisation of racially minoritised peoples (Bressey, 2002; Collard, 2023), mirroring inequities in policing (Dodd, 2023), healthcare (Campbell, 2020) and pandemic outcomes (Siddiq et al., 2023). They saw inclusive curriculums as essential to confronting the institutional racism that leaves racially minoritised peoples feeling like space invaders (Puwar, 2004).

At the heart of their critique was the literary canon, an apparatus of exclusion. While its linguistic roots in the Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition (Lim, 2022) suggest fixity, the boundaries of the canon are ultimately fluid (Guillory, 1993). Yet this potential for inclusivity remains unrealised—texts by racially minoritised authors continue to be excluded by undefined criteria (Scholes, 1998). Functioning as both gatekeeper (Weiss, 2009) and cultural arbiter (Gates, 1990), the canon privileges white voices, naturalising their dominance (Bourdieu, 1990; Jacoby, 1975). This constructed hierarchy, often mistaken for inherent value (Dei, 2000; Eagleton, 1983), serves ideological ends by preserving hegemonic knowledge and values (Altieri, 1990).

Nowhere is this exclusionary logic more institutionalised than in England's educational policy, which rests upon the canon. The influential *Newbolt Report* (1921) enshrined English as the ‘gateway’ (p. 118) to ‘great’ (p. 14) literature, invoking Matthew Arnold's, (1962) ideal of ‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’ (p. viii). Yet this expansive vision has been systematically narrowed—from the nativist retreat of the *Kingman Report* (1988) to ‘the best that has been thought and said in our language’ (p. 11) to the current national

curriculum (Department for Education [DfE], 2014), which pointedly erases Arnold's reference to 'the world'. Such nebulous notions of *best* and *great* presume a universalism (Hadley & Toliver, 2023) that reflects colonial epistemic violence (Truman, 2023). The disproportionate focus on this exclusionary canon manifests in just 1.5% of students studying GCSE texts by racially minoritised authors (Elliott et al., 2024), despite evidence supporting diverse curriculums (Montgomery, 2001). Thus, the canon operates as an instrument of cultural power—reifying the capital of one culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) while systematically marginalising the cultural wealth of racially minoritised communities (Yosso, 2005). It silences alternative knowledge systems (Santos, 2014) and privileges white male perspectives (Olufemi, 2020), enforcing an epistemic hierarchy that excludes the voices of racially minoritised peoples by default (Shukla, 2017).

CRT illuminates these dynamics, framing racism as structural and endemic (Bell, 1992). CRT scholars employ counterstories to disrupt dominant narratives (Dixson et al., 2017; Gillborn, 2006), exposing how systems of knowledge production, such as the literary canon, replicate racial exclusion (Guillory, 1993). The canon operates as a mechanism of cultural gatekeeping, whereby its defenders accrue prestige by preserving its boundaries. This aligns with the contemporary 'knowledge-rich' curriculum (Gibb, 2021), which enshrines a white, Eurocentric canon as universal knowledge while obscuring its hegemonic function (Tate, 1997). CRT interrogates the power behind these processes, questioning who defines essential knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), controls textual visibility (Puwar, 2020) and legitimises certain epistemologies (Noddings, 2015). Yet CRT faces political resistance: the previous government denounced its teaching (Trilling, 2020), a stance unchallenged by its successor. Teachers, wary of reductive accusations of being 'woke' or engaging in a 'culture war' (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1), often avoid race-related issues, seeing them as challenging (Anderson et al., 2019; Gillborn et al., 2019), further entrenching curricular stagnation.

Through a CRT lens, the literary canon functions as a racial contract (Mills, 1997): a tacit agreement to privilege whiteness as the norm. It thereby operates as an instrument of ideological control, reinforcing exclusion under the veneer of tradition. Applied to education, a CRT lens reveals how whiteness, 'the color of supremacy' (Leonardo, 2004, p. 138), seeps into curriculum design. In England, these exclusionary practices intensified after the 2008 financial crisis, when economic anxieties (Wardley-Kershaw & Schenk-Hoppé, 2022) fuelled a retreat into cultural nationalism (Colley, 2009). This was exemplified by the nationalist turn of Brexit (Stocker, 2017) and the post-2015 policy-driven reassertion of the canon, where superficial diversity efforts were abandoned in favour of privileging older white texts (Nelson-Addy et al., 2018). This renewed focus on the canon entrenched colonial epistemologies (Puwar, 2020) and marginalised the voices of racially minoritised peoples, producing the stagnant, exclusionary curriculum that students explicitly rejected during the 2020 BLM protests.

ENGLISH TEACHERS, THE CANON AND THE REPRODUCTION OF RACIAL EXCLUSION

English teachers function as arbiters of literary value, inducting students into a canon that reflects their own educational formation (Thomas et al., 2017). Trained within overwhelmingly white curriculums (Peters, 2015), they unconsciously replicate dominant cultural norms (Said, 1993), perpetuating an institutionalised, selective tradition (Barthes, 1989; Fowler, 1979). Their pedagogical choices, shaped by limited critical training on race and representation (McIntosh et al., 2019; Picower, 2021), actively construct the boundaries of the canon (Lauter, 1991). Demographic homogeneity exacerbates this cycle: 88.6% of teachers in England are white (GOV.UK, 2025c), with even lower diversity in English departments

(Elliott et al., 2021). This disconnection is striking—classrooms where 38.0% of students identify as racially minoritised are taught primarily white texts by teachers often ill-equipped to address racialised knowledge gaps (Lee, 1992). While texts by racially minoritised authors could enhance engagement and belonging (Becker & Luthar, 2002), systemic barriers persist: from paywalled research to undergraduate degrees still centred on white authors (Salami, 2015; Thompson, 2015). Even when teachers desire change (Busby, 2023), structural constraints prevail. The sacralisation of the canon (Miller, 2020) fosters self-surveillance (Bartky, 2015), as teachers police their own adherence to hegemonic norms to maintain professional legitimacy. Compounded by workload pressures (Xie et al., 2022) and racial discomfort (Gillborn et al., 2019), many default to nostalgic teaching of the canon (Jones, 2022), which alienates racially minoritised students by dismissing their lived knowledge (Brandon, 2003)—a pedagogical failure that leads to student disengagement (Lee, 2005).

Racially minoritised teachers face these challenges while enduring additional labour. Their degrees demanded assimilation into whiteness (Spanierman, 2022); now, as professionals, they navigate white institutional spaces (Hochschild, 1983), weighing whether to confront racism (Evans & Moore, 2015) or endure in silence (Ahmed, 2021). Often tokenised as diversity experts (Williams et al., 2019), they risk further marginalisation by advocating for change. Evidence of this marginalisation is clear: racially minoritised teachers leading anti-racist training report overt retaliation, including professional sabotage and exclusion (Bennett et al., 2025). This advocacy occurs within a structure where career advancement is scarce—only 4.7% of headteachers are racially minoritised (GOV.UK, 2025c), reinforcing ethnic pay disparities (Brynin & Güveli, 2012). Add the toll of microaggressions and racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2006) and the stakes of challenging the canon become untenable.

Material conditions also stifle change. From 2009 to 2020, school spending per pupil in England fell by 9%—the steepest sustained cut in four decades (Sibieta, 2024). New books are unaffordable. The canonical texts already populating book cupboards are used out of necessity. Their enduring physical presence links teachers to their predecessors, reinforcing the grip of the canon—'the more a path is used, the more a path is used' (Ahmed, 2017). Austerity and ideology have fastened the canon firmly at the centre of English teaching.

Teaching texts well requires extensive resources: schemes of work, lesson plans, individual tasks and PowerPoint presentations. Yet many teachers in England work over 60 hours a week (Weale, 2019), burdened by administrative, pastoral and marking demands, meaning that creating new resources is often unfeasible. Adequate teaching materials are vital (Jerrim, 2024), but they are markedly lacking for texts by racially minoritised authors (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Emerging, practice-focused scholarship provides vital pedagogical blueprints for such work, modelling how contemporary texts by racially minoritised authors can affirm student experience and spur critical discussion (Saleh, 2025). Yet these remain specialist resources, not the standardised, time-saving materials that teachers need. This resource gap directly shapes practice. Consequently, while isolated teachers *have* introduced such texts, their numbers remain very low (Elliott et al., 2024). The scale of exclusion is striking: the overall percentage of GCSE students answering questions on a text by a racially minoritised author more than doubled following the Lit in Colour initiative, yet this rise only reached 1.5% in 2023, up from 0.7% in 2019 (Elliott et al., 2021, 2024). This small absolute increase highlights the structural resistance to change. Thus, teachers revert to canonical texts, which are richly resourced. Canonical texts dominate because they are practical, reliable and teacher-ready—luxuries that time-poor teachers cannot ignore.

These texts also offer perceived safety. Tried and tested, canonical texts are seen as appropriate for students. Their mere presence in the school environment reinforces the illusion

of safety, a presumption not afforded to texts by racially minoritised authors. Pain-centred publishing trends targeting racially minoritised authors (hooks, 1990) further marginalise their work, branding it as inappropriate for school settings. When such texts do feature, they are often relegated to shorter forms—poems, short stories or non-fiction extracts—limiting their curricular weight. Meanwhile, most English classroom time is spent on novels—the main event of literary study (Bleiman, 2020). When confined to shorter forms, works by racially minoritised authors are implicitly marginalised, treated as mere supplements to dominant, canonical white narratives. Such cursory cultural tours (Johnston & Mangat, 2012) reduce their stories to static, orientalist portrayals (Said, 1985), reinforcing racially minoritised peoples as marginal. These brief inclusions risk essentialism (Vinz, 2000), becoming tokenistic 'ahistorical bandages' (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 94) that leave the white canon fundamentally unchallenged.

Summary

The existing scholarship has firmly established both the structural whiteness of English curriculums (Olufemi, 2020) and the institutional barriers to meaningful diversification (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Important work has documented the persistent underrepresentation of texts by racially minoritised authors (Boakye, 2022; Saleh, 2023) and CRT reveals how these patterns reflect deeper systems of racial exclusion (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The post-BLM expansion of examination texts by racially minoritised authors (Weale, 2021) risks becoming a prime example of *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980)—a superficial concession that maintains the dominance of the canon. This outcome is driven by teachers' inadequate training on race (McIntosh et al., 2019) and sustained institutional resistance (Gillborn et al., 2019). What remains unexamined is how these structural tensions manifest in teachers' professional lives. The policy environment (DfE, 2014) and school cultures create conditions where performative diversity (Ahmed, 2020) often substitutes for substantive change, yet existing research lacks understanding of how teachers navigate this terrain. My study addresses this critical gap by investigating how teachers negotiate the paradox between their antiracist commitments and systemic constraints in their post-BLM practice.

My research makes significant contributions in three key areas: (1) advancing CRT applications in education in England through its examination of teacher agency within constrained systems; (2) providing empirical evidence of how policy environments and institutional practices mediate teachers' ability to enact antiracist change; and (3) revealing the disconnection between performative diversity initiatives and meaningful structural reform. My qualitative approach, detailed in the following methodology section, is specifically designed to capture these nuanced professional negotiations. By centring teacher experiences, my research shifts the conversation from simply identifying curriculum gaps to analysing the mechanisms that maintain those gaps (Tate, 1997), focusing on the teachers trying to deliver the change that their BLM-inspired students demanded.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual framework

I adopted a critical constructivist stance (Kincheloe, 2005), viewing social reality, specifically the racialised structures of education and the literary canon, as produced through history and power, yet experienced as materially consequential (Gergen, 2009). To investigate

this, I employed CRT through the analytic practice of counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I constructed a composite narrative from teachers' experiential accounts to document the tangible impact of systemic barriers and critically interrogate the institutional logic of the canon—even when individual participants expressed ambivalence, pragmatic accommodation or traditionalist adherence to it.

Research design, positionality and participants

My study was based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Marvasti & Tanner, 2020) with 11 secondary school English teachers in Southeast England. To trace their professional journeys from 2020 to 2024 and stimulate recall, participants completed a visual timeline activity (Bagnoli, 2009; see Appendices A–C). This narrative-informed design (King, 2003), using a tool specifically intended to elicit narrative accounts of experience over time, was chosen to align with my focus on process and professional change.

My positionality as a racially minoritised former English teacher positioned me simultaneously as an insider and outsider of the system I was researching, a stance demanding rigorous reflexivity about perspective and power (Unterhalter, 2020). It enabled the rapport necessary for candid discussion of race and curriculum but required disciplined reflexivity. I maintained a reflexive journal to critically interrogate my own assumptions and influence throughout the research process (Pillow, 2003), ensuring that participants' subjective meaning-making remained the central focus of analysis (Cohen et al., 2007; Rees et al., 2020).

I recruited participants via convenience sampling (Moriarty, 2020) from my professional network in Southeast England. The diversity of the region (Catney & Wright, 2023) might have influenced their views. The regional concentration of the sample may limit transferability to rural or less diverse settings. I intentionally oversampled racially minoritised teachers (36.4%, $n = 4/11$; see Table 1), a proportion significantly higher than both the national average at the time of sampling (16.2%; GOV.UK, 2024) and the current figure (11.4%; GOV.UK, 2025c). This was to ensure representation of those most directly affected by the race-related issues central to my research questions (Jackson & Moorley, 2021).

TABLE 1 Participants.

Participant	Racially minoritised (yes or no)	Age	Number of years teaching
1	No	31–35	11–15
2	No	26–30	6–10
3	No	31–35	6–10
4	No	36–40	11–15
5	Yes	36–40	11–15
6	No	36–40	11–15
7	Yes	51–55	21–25
8	Yes	31–35	11–15
9	No	51–55	16–20
10	No	21–25	1–5
11	Yes	51–55	11–15

DATA ANALYSIS

I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) as the operational mechanism for my counter-storytelling approach. I coded iteratively in NVivo, looking beyond surface content to identify the logics of constraint, agency and institutional reproduction within teachers' narratives. I constructed three overarching themes—change, opportunities and barriers—to trace how the disruptive potential of BLM was activated and, crucially, how it was systematically contained.

Findings

Theme 1: Change

BLM acted as a definitive catalyst, reshaping all participants' professional journeys after 2020. In this section, I analyse its role in triggering pedagogical reassessment, creating a new permissiveness for curricular change and shaping teachers' cautious yet determined outlook on the future of English teaching.

The catalytic effect of BLM

The movement created a shared 'political zeitgeist' (Participant 4) that triggered immediate and profound critical reflection, igniting a widespread 'thirst for change', which was explored by all 11 participants. This catalytic moment compelled teachers to fundamentally reassess their practice. Participant 7 realised the need to modify content and subsequently shifted to employing 'different lenses to enter literature, linked to social justice'. For white teachers like Participant 2, this meant a personal reckoning, as they were 'urged by social injustices described in BLM articles' to interrogate their own 'privilege and prejudice'. For racially minoritised teachers already pursuing diversification, such as Participant 11, BLM 'sped up' these efforts because now their 'entire department had been forced to consider a more diverse curriculum'.

BLM generated a unique atmosphere of legitimacy and urgency that significantly lowered institutional resistance to diversifying the curriculum. Participant 4, a department head, leveraged this momentum to make texts by racially minoritised authors 'mandatory'. This proposal 'met little resistance'. The 'mainstream awareness of race issues' made proposed changes seem 'relevant' and credible (Participant 7). Crucially, BLM transformed classroom discourse, making race-based 'conversations easier with students who had become more conscious of othering as a strategy' used by the white hegemony (Participant 9). This shift enabled teachers to more confidently 'embed interrogation of racism' into their teaching (Participant 11) and moved departments towards more discussion-based pedagogies that 'made space for student opinions' (Participant 10).

Ultimately, these changes reflected a deeper shift, moving teachers towards critical consciousness. Teachers were 'inspired by BLM to read books about racial inequity', sparking 'more conversations aimed at change', which created a shift in perspective because 'you can't unread a book' (Participant 1).

Future change

Participants described a tangible sense of momentum. Participant 11 felt confident that 'we are moving towards' teaching more texts by racially minoritised authors, while Participant 9 perceived a historical 'arc', arguing that though 'the pendulum might swing back, it never goes as far back as it started'. This participant was 'grateful to have had the chance to redeem' their approach, feeling that they changed to become a 'much better reader, teacher

and citizen', which would affect their teaching in the future. Participant 3 expressed hope that teachers would find more texts by racially minoritised authors 'because they are definitely out there'. Participant 2 expressed a quiet confidence that 'change will happen in time—it is just going to get better'.

Discussion

BLM prompted a pedagogical shift amongst English teachers, manifesting in deliberate efforts to incorporate more texts by racially minoritised authors. BLM provided the background to their 2020 teaching: the scale of antiracist rallies (Mohdin et al., 2020) and numerous news articles provided a dynamic atmosphere. The breadth of race-related issues discussed after BLM caused some fundamental shifts in outlook, with some participants acknowledging their white privilege (McIntosh, 2019). Many participants gained awareness of the inadequacies of current English Literature curriculums (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Saleh, 2023), seeking to change their curriculums where they could. The outlook shift amongst some BLM-inspired teachers indicated a questioning of the hegemonic ideologies of the canon (Smith, 1988). Some participants' moves towards teaching with a social justice lens exemplified an attempt to provide counterstories aligned with CRT principles (Gillborn, 2006). For those participants, BLM enacted a seismic shift to their teaching journey.

Every participant felt the post-BLM imperative for change, mirroring the overwhelming consensus in the profession: 98% value texts by racially minoritised authors (Sundorph, 2020) and 80% want them as set texts (Flood, 2022). Teachers modified their approaches, with some making such texts mandatory, appreciating the need to empower racially minoritised students through culturally relevant material (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Others embedded antiracist interrogation in their teaching, deeming antiracist pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) necessary after BLM. These changes were facilitated by increased student and teacher awareness of racism. They found their students and colleagues more open to discussing marginalisation (Bressey, 2002) and the suppression of other knowledges (Puwar, 2020). Teachers aimed to sustain their BLM-inspired changes moving forward. Rather than feeling nostalgia for their training (Jones, 2022), some participants celebrated BLM for revealing its flaws, intending to apply this transformed outlook to their future teaching. Some participants credited BLM with helping them recognise how social movements can create positive change, leading them to view further improvement as inevitable. BLM had brought them hope.

Overall, the openness to change across participants was striking. With each participant highlighting the varied effects of BLM, its power to reshape teachers' professional journeys became evident.

Theme 2: Opportunities

While BLM catalysed the desire for change, four key opportunities enabled teachers to act: a new mandate from students, validating engagement with new texts, the direct imperative of diverse classrooms and new text offerings from examination boards.

Students demanding change

Participants reported their students demanding change after engaging with BLM. For Participant 2, students gained 'confidence to raise their voices and teachers listened'. Participant 5's students were 'forced to confront their own ethnicity in a way they had not before', raising questions about 'colonial mindsets' with which teachers had to reckon. Teachers like Participant 9 welcomed this, valuing having 'the establishment challenged from below'. This shift in classroom power dynamics prompted direct pedagogical changes,

such as Participant 10's move to ‘make space for student opinions’ through discussion-based teaching. The majority of participants interviewed (seven of the 11) celebrated student demands for change, viewing them as an opportunity to transform their teaching journey.

Student engagement

Students engaged well with newly taught texts by racially minoritised authors (mentioned by nine of the 11 participants), vindicating the changes made by BLM-inspired teachers. Participant 8's students ‘appreciated and really liked’ these texts. Participant 11 described their racially minoritised students connecting personally with a novel, noting their reaction: ‘It's like that in my family!’ A racially minoritised parent echoed this, reporting that they were ‘delighted to see themselves in’ their child's school text. Importantly, ‘all students’ benefited from the ‘springboard for discussions about belonging’. Participant 6's text by a racially minoritised author proved ‘a revelation’, enabling students to ‘discuss cultural differences. They also really loved’ how the teacher ‘had to approach it as an outsider too’—a ‘democratic’ dynamic that made the text feel ‘more alive’. The result was ‘really good’ essays demonstrating ‘great understanding’. Intersectional texts ‘moving away from the white male canon towards historically overlooked women writers’ left students particularly enthused. Participant 2's students responded ‘really well’ to intersectional texts—an experience echoed by Participant 5, whose class named a text by a racially minoritised woman their ‘favourite ever studied’. Students thrived on being treated as ‘teenagers who understood its mature themes’, and its introduction won ‘overwhelming support’, leaving the teacher certain it would be ‘mad to remove it’. Such feedback reinforced the necessity of BLM-inspired curricular shifts.

Racially minoritised students

All participants taught racially minoritised students, creating opportunities for change. Participant 4 was ‘encouraged to be more sensitive and to think about what life is like’ for these students, ultimately changing their ‘practice quite a bit’. Participant 5's racially minoritised students engaged in ‘student-led activism’, their ‘personal backgrounds’ making BLM more compelling, enabling discussions to emerge ‘from themselves, not from a top-down curriculum chain’. Racially minoritised students taught teachers—one shared Robin DiAngelo's work, causing ‘an epiphany’, transforming Participant 9's practice, revealing issues they ‘had never properly thought about’. Participant 1 noted that racially minoritised students ‘were keen on diverse content’, an enthusiasm that spread to peers not normally ‘interested in political issues’. This ‘heightened political engagement’ prompted pedagogical adaptation. For Participant 10's ‘primarily non-white’ class, the question became: ‘Why would we only pick white texts?’ Participant 3 similarly concluded that ‘literature should represent all students’. These reflections led to structural change, with Participant 2 reassessing the ‘whole scheme of work’, consistently asking, ‘Does this represent our student body?’ Thus, the voices and experiences of their racially minoritised students, amplified by the context of BLM, became a direct and powerful impetus for critical reflection and altered teaching journeys.

Examination boards

Teachers' journeys were also aided by changes to examination board offerings for GCSE and A-level texts. Participant 11 was pleased that ‘there were more diverse books’ on the syllabus, linking this to ‘more awareness’ of race-related issues after BLM. Participant 5 felt that it was not solely ‘the examination boards' role to lead the charge’ but praised efforts like ‘Pearson's Lit in Colour’ as ‘really positive’. Participant 4 appreciated the curricular freedom to pursue ‘postcolonial coursework texts at A-level’. Participant 3 commended examination boards for being ‘proactive’ post-BLM, including introducing a ‘brilliant text’ by a racially minoritised author that students ‘absolutely loved’. Significantly, Participant 9's ‘really

multicultural syllabus' now featured only 'one white European male' author out of six, thanks to examination boards being pushed by BLM to 'strongly diversify the menu'.

Discussion

The constellation of opportunities reveals the mechanism through which the catalytic pressure of BLM was operationalised into sustained pedagogical change. Students' demands, articulated with new confidence after joining thousands in calling for curricular reform (Gibson, 2020), provided the essential mandate and moral impetus. This direct challenge made diversification a necessity, creating a dynamic where teachers, valuing students' challenges to the hegemony, were compelled to listen. Profound student engagement with newly introduced texts then provided the validation that cemented these shifts, with teachers finding that diverse narratives foster wider student engagement (Lee, 2005). This engagement was deeply connective, bridging the biographical and ideological divides between teachers and students (Brandon, 2003; Cochran-Smith et al., 2004). For racially minoritised students, it was particularly transformative, boosting engagement and belonging (Becker & Luthar, 2002) as they shared cultural knowledge (Lee, 1992) and saw their backgrounds reflected through responsive, inclusive curriculums (Thompson, 2015)—a power highlighted by the familial reaction to finally seeing their stories represented. Significantly, the provision of these texts by examination boards supplied the structural opportunity, rendering such curricular diversification logistically possible.

Thus, student voice created the imperative for change, a need amplified by the direct presence of racially minoritised students in the classroom. This demand was then validated by profound student engagement, which proved the pedagogical worth of newly introduced texts. Finally, examination board provision supplied the crucial structural opportunity. These four opportunities formed a coherent ecosystem for translating the energy of BLM into classroom practice.

Theme 3: Barriers

While BLM catalysed the desire for change and specific opportunities enabled action, teachers' journeys were ultimately curtailed by a resilient system of barriers. In this section, I explore these constraints: the critical deficit of resources; the challenge in finding appropriate texts; pervasive difficulty with race; performative or punitive school responses; the distinct professional pressures on racially minoritised and white teachers; canon-centric training and a dearth of professional development; the enduring ideological power of the canon; and the tokenising concession of teaching shorter texts by racially minoritised authors. The length of this list is significant: the system was configured to absorb the shock of BLM and preserve its epistemic core.

Resources

All 11 participants identified a critical lack of resources for texts by racially minoritised authors as a primary barrier to change. Scarcity operated on two fronts. Primary resources for texts by racially minoritised authors were physically absent; Participant 8 stated that text selection was dictated by 'what's in the cupboard', which contained no such works. Secondary resources, from schemes of work to revision guides, were virtually non-existent, summarised by Participant 4's assessment: 'There is nothing out there'. This deficit made adopting a new text a task of prohibitive labour. Participant 2's department, attempting to build materials from scratch, concluded they 'just didn't have time or emotional resilience'. When examination boards expanded their offerings, they provided little pedagogical support; as Participant 3 noted, this meant receiving 'barely any resources', which forced teachers to

generate ‘endless past papers’ with no assurance of quality. Consequently, ‘heavily resourced canonical texts’ (Participant 5) prevailed. As Participant 6 described, time-poor teachers sought ‘the biggest bit of driftwood’ in an overwhelming ‘ocean of resource development’, a dynamic that systematically preserved the canonical status quo.

Appropriate texts by racially minoritised authors

The search for suitable texts by racially minoritised authors presented a significant discursive barrier, as participants grappled with perceptions of inappropriateness on multiple fronts. Teachers reported that available contemporary works were often deemed ‘graphic and inappropriate’, leading them to select ‘gentler canonical books’ as a safer ‘fit’ (Participant 4). This perception was compounded by a publishing landscape that had ‘long suppressed’ racially minoritised voices, resulting in a ‘narrower range of teachable literature’ (Participant 3). Consequently, teachers like Participant 11 expressed being ‘worried about teaching’ such texts, while Participant 10 refused to teach popular works deemed ‘really inappropriate’. This opposition extended to parents, who frequently policed the boundaries of the curriculum. Participant 3 observed that parents ‘got their hackles up’ at texts outside the traditional canon, yet ‘didn't bat an eyelid at far more shocking elements’ in canonical works—a double standard that reinforced the marginal status of texts by racially minoritised authors.

Furthermore, pedagogical concerns merged with the practical incentive of exam preparation. Participant 10 articulated a common tension: a canonical text might ‘not represent the students, but it gave them the best chance of passing because it is incredibly easy’. When combined with anxieties over age-appropriateness, this calculus systematically disqualified texts by racially minoritised authors. Despite attempts ‘to find alternative texts’, teachers found them too ‘inappropriate in content’ (Participant 5). Faced with this convergence of cultural, parental and pragmatic resistance, teachers' journeys were curtailed, leading them to ‘inevitably fall back’ on the familiar canon (Participant 3).

Difficulty with race

The navigation of race-based discussions constituted a significant barrier, defined by fear, discomfort and a consequent strategic avoidance. Teachers operated within a climate of perceived risk, with Participant 2 ‘fear[ing] crossing the line’ on ‘British values regulations’ and Participant 9 finding the topic inherently ‘contested’. This institutional ambiguity bred pedagogical uncertainty, as Participant 6 admitted teachers ‘did not know how to guide students’ through BLM-related issues. For many, racial ‘discomfort’ directly incentivised retreat to the ‘comfortable’ white canon (Participant 7).

This dynamic was intensified by the unique burden placed on English teachers. They ‘carried the weight’ of race-related conversations ‘more than other subject teachers’ (Participant 10), a demanding form of emotional labour for which they felt ill-prepared. For this participant, confronted with high-stakes difficulty without support, avoidance became a rational choice: ‘Why have the conversation when you can just ignore it because it is difficult?’ This strategic avoidance, a rational response to a system that imposed high demands while offering no guidance—formed a powerful, self-reinforcing barrier that actively hindered the curricular change that BLM demanded.

School response

Institutional responses to BLM formed a defining structural barrier, characterised by a disconnection between public rhetoric and private reality. While some schools issued supportive statements, teachers consistently encountered performative commitment. Schools merely paid ‘lip service’ (Participant 11), a sentiment reflected in Participant 8's experience where a ‘performative’ assembly ‘led nowhere’, leaving the ‘tensions of BLM ignored’. Participant 3's school conducted ‘an audit on race but they did nothing’ to act on

its findings—a failure of action that encapsulates the experience of half the participants (6 of 11).

More damagingly, leadership responses often shifted from passive neglect to overt suppression. Participant 9 was 'appalled' by the punitive framing of students who spoke 'absolute sense, very courteously' as 'bad examples', which left teachers feeling 'compromised' between student solidarity and 'huge pressure from above to hold the grown-up line'. This culture of silencing was explicit at Participant 10's school, where a teacher's audit revealing a lack of representation was met with a managerial threat: 'If you show this to anyone, I will see you fired'. The overarching institutional ethos, summarised by Participant 10's head of department response, was stagnation: 'Don't say anything; this is how it is run'. Consequently, the 'chatting about change' noted by Participant 10 never translated into action. Thus, school responses operated as a mechanism of containment: enforcing silence, punishing critique and legitimising inaction, which directly stalled the meaningful change that BLM had inspired.

Pressures facing racially minoritised and white teachers

The push for change exerted distinct yet equally constraining professional pressures on teachers, sharply demarcated by background. Racially minoritised teachers navigated a paradoxical burden: expected to serve as institutional experts on race while their authority was circumscribed. Participant 8 felt 'profoundly alienated' as the only racially minoritised teacher at their school and refused an unpaid mandate to 'lead a diversity body'. Participant 7 rejected the assumption that they could 'represent' all racially minoritised perspectives, noting that they 'could not resonate' with students' specific experiences. This tokenising expectation coexisted with a climate of resistance from some white colleagues, whom Participant 5 observed maintained a 'staunch adherence to only white texts'.

Concurrently, white teachers advocating for change faced an internalised barrier rooted in identity. Participant 3's 'lineage' within a 'still predominantly white' profession felt like an impediment to 'meaningful' progress. Participant 2 described fighting 'a battle against' themself, confronting how much further their 'views needed to shift'. This reckoning was compounded by the default pathway of their training: as Participant 6 observed, white teachers who 'have studied white texts' were 'far more likely' to teach them—a trajectory that required laboriously dismantling 'many ingrained levels of conservativism'.

Consequently, both groups were ensnared in a system that compounded the emotional labour of change: racially minoritised teachers were overburdened with symbolic representation, while white teachers were paralysed by the weight of confronting their own implicated identities. These parallel pressures formed a complementary barrier, stifling agency from both sides of the racial line.

Training and professional development

The systemic failure to prepare teachers for an inclusive curriculum presented a foundational barrier. Participant 9 realised post-BLM that their 'narrow' degree, containing no racially minoritised authors, offered 'no grounding' for teaching such texts. This sentiment was widespread: Participant 11 described a degree following 'one white timeline', and Participant 10 acknowledged that 'race had not entered [their] thought process' due to a 'very traditional literary background'. This formation instilled a canonical disposition; for Participant 8, the canon 'was what they had been trained for' and synonymous with 'good literature'.

This deficit was perpetuated by an absence of meaningful professional development. Participants uniformly reported a vacuum of support: 'no training' (Participant 11), 'no CPD' (Participant 2) and no authoritative 'body able to quickly upskill teachers' (Participant 3). The result was a burdensome, isolated form of professional learning, leaving teachers to 'teach themselves as they go along' (Participant 11). Even institutional 'celebration of

diversity' failed to translate into practical 'collaboration across the curriculum' (Participant 10). Consequently, the labour of change was passed onto individual teachers, who lacked 'time and energy' (Participant 8) to source external supports. This structural training gap ensured that curricular diversification remained a precarious, personal endeavour rather than a professionally mandated and supported shift.

Power of the canon

The canon exerted a dual force as a barrier, functioning as both a pragmatic safety net and a source of professional identity, explored by nine of 11 participants. Operationally, it provided a default of low-risk efficiency. Texts were 'tried and tested' (Participant 3), a 'safe bet' for securing 'good examination results' (Participant 10). In times of uncertainty during lockdown, this utility became a refuge, with departments insisting, 'We need to teach some really solid stuff; the world could be ending' (Participant 2). This institutional risk aversion enforced conformity, dissuading teachers from straying beyond its bounds.

Culturally, the canon constituted a form of professional capital. Teachers, socialised to see themselves as 'well-read' (Participant 8), internalised a curatorial role, defending what they 'consider important' (Participant 1). This gatekeeping mentality equated canonical fidelity with intellectual rigour, so that deviating risked 'setting lower expectations' (Participant 7). Consequently, advocates for change faced 'raised eyebrows' and 'snobbery' (Participant 2) from colleagues who were protective of the 'legacy of the canon'. Its authority was thus self-perpetuating: the practical convenience of the familiar merged with its symbolic prestige to make diversification not just difficult, but professionally suspect.

Shorter texts by racially minoritised authors

Curricular inclusion was often confined to the margins through the concession of shorter texts—poetry, short stories and non-fiction excerpts—which functioned as a structural compromise that contained broader change. Participant 3 typified this approach, viewing short texts as an 'effective and efficient way to create more diversity', a strategy echoed by others who 'plugged postcolonial gaps' with poems 'about race' (Participant 4) or created a 'varied poetry anthology' (Participant 2). This piecemeal inclusion, however, reinforced a hierarchy of literary value. As Participant 7 noted, it led to the essentialisation of racially minoritised authors, whose work in anthologies was often 'confined to race', while 'white poets [wrote] about anything'. Consequently, these texts served a tokenising function. Participant 6 observed that 'piecemeal smaller texts are used to fill the quota' in a way that 'devalues those voices', implicitly framing them as a temporary diversion before returning to 'the serious big guys—the white authors'.

Thus, while allowing surface-level diversity, the reliance on shorter texts operated as a mechanism of curricular containment. It enabled institutions to claim inclusivity while avoiding the substantive commitment of integrating full-length, examined novels by racially minoritised authors.

Discussion

The interconnected barriers reveal how a resistant system actively contained the transformative potential catalysed by BLM. These constraints were systemic in origin and function. The lack of material resources and canon-centric teacher training (McIntosh et al., 2019) together reproduced the cultural capital of white texts (Guillory, 1993), while the enduring power of the canon itself perpetuated a singular, centralised viewpoint (Miller, 2020).

Barriers were also discursive and operational. The painting of texts by racially minoritised authors as inappropriate often reflected the limited pain narratives deemed publishable (hooks, 1990), shrinking the pool of teachable literature. This was compounded by

performative or punitive school responses that enforced a tacitly racist status quo (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), with leadership suppressing audit findings and even threatening teachers' careers. Within this climate, the pervasive difficulty with race led to strategic avoidance, as teachers feared sanction and lacked training to navigate charged discussions (Sue et al., 2011).

These pressures stratified along racial lines, creating a complementary stasis. Racially minoritised teachers were tokenised, expected to perform unpaid diversity labour (Williams et al., 2019), while white teachers grappled with the paralysing discomfort of confronting their own implicated identities (Gillborn et al., 2019). The ultimate containment mechanism of the system, however, was its capacity for tokenistic concession through shorter texts. This practice created a superficial diversity while preserving the curricular core, essentialising racially minoritised voices (Vinz, 2000) and ensuring that their work remained marginal (Thomas et al., 2017).

Thus, the barriers did not simply exist alongside the opportunities for change; they actively neutralised them. The system demonstrated a resilient capacity to absorb the shock of BLM through performative gestures and structural inertia, ultimately preserving its epistemic foundation. My analysis highlights that without dismantling these interconnected constraints, the professional journeys of change inspired by BLM will remain fundamentally curtailed.

CONCLUSION

The 2020 resurgence of BLM marked a pivotal moment for English teachers, compelling them to critically reassess their pedagogical practices and text selections. My research contributes to equity debates by centring teacher narratives, revealing the antiracist efforts of teachers who strove for change despite a government-mandated monocultural curriculum (Okolosie, 2013) and the most recent national report on race denying institutional racism (GOV.UK, 2021). By applying CRT to the British context, countering right-wing claims that it is merely an American concern (Warmington, 2024), I expose how institutional mechanisms (canon preservation, resource gaps and school policy stagnation) suppress the perspectives of racially minoritised peoples. My findings highlight the affordances of BLM: while it inspired hope and urgency, its energy was stifled by systemic resistance.

My study shows how BLM catalysed a shift in teachers' journeys: they responded to student demands for equity, attempting to diversify curriculums and adopt antiracist pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017). Participants, many undergoing an ‘epistemic revolution’ (Fricker, 2003, p. 162), questioned colonial knowledge structures (Manion & Shah, 2019) and the exclusionary nature of the canon. BLM fostered critical consciousness (Jemal, 2017). The adoption of texts by racially minoritised authors particularly benefited racially minoritised students, who felt less like additional others (Bhopal, 2015) as teachers embraced care and respect (hooks, 1994). Importantly, *all* students engaged more deeply with these texts.

Three key findings emerge. First, BLM disrupted pedagogical norms, with teachers eager to change their practices by incorporating more texts by racially minoritised authors. Second, teachers were aided by specific opportunities: energised students demanded change; students engaged meaningfully with texts by racially minoritised authors (notable in a nation where over half of students are disaffected by reading [Videbaek, 2020]); the presence of racially minoritised students in classrooms provided impetus; and examination boards' inclusion of texts by racially minoritised authors created structural openings. Third, entrenched barriers persisted. Institutional inertia, resource gaps and the dominant canon constrained progress. Teachers confronted inadequate training, leadership resistance and parental pushback against unfamiliar texts. Here, performative diversity took

hold—examination boards' inclusion of texts by racially minoritised authors reflected interest convergence (Bell, 1980), offering symbolic representation (Warmington, 2024) without substantive support. Ultimately, institutional roadblocks stifled the momentum of BLM.

To dismantle these systemic barriers, four interventions are urgent:

1. Mandate CRT and antiracist pedagogy in teacher education to equip new teachers with the critical frameworks needed to diversify the canon, directly addressing critiques of 'limited and problematic' training (Participant 9).
2. Invest in resource equity through a centralised fund for texts by racially minoritised authors and inclusive resources, countering reliance on 'what's in the cupboard' (Participant 8).
3. Embed diversity in accountability frameworks by expanding Ofsted's remit to assess representation, reflecting students' 'overwhelming support' (Participant 5) for broader representation.
4. Formalise student leadership through curriculum co-design councils, operationalising the energy of students who gained 'confidence to raise their voices' (Participant 2) about antiracist approaches post-BLM.

The four interventions proposed here are strengthened by their alignment with wider research that offers specific, evidence-based calls for systemic reform. These include mandating racial literacy training for school leaders, integrating explicit anti-racist metrics into the Ofsted framework and providing clear statutory guidance on racism within safeguarding duties (Bennett et al., 2025). Furthermore, they address the critical resource gaps and lack of representative teaching resources identified as fundamental barriers to change (Elliott et al., 2024; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Looking ahead, the interventions provide a roadmap for systemic change. Future research must investigate their implementation, particularly how teacher training programmes can integrate CRT and how student leadership models disrupt traditional power dynamics. Comparative studies across regions (not just the Southeast) could reveal how policy environments facilitate or hinder progress. Yet such change requires political will and investment. The current government's initial school plan (Labour, 2024) offered little hope, omitting race, ethnicity and inclusion. However, the DfE's Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025) now recommends that the government 'include stronger representation of the diversity that makes up our modern society' (p. 52). Without this institutional commitment, the efforts of BLM-inspired teachers will remain isolated and racially minoritised voices will stay marginalised. The transformative potential of 2020 will remain unrealised and the canon, buttressed by the hegemonic structures that I have mapped, will endure, fundamentally undisturbed.

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I declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The interview datasets generated during my study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality, as per my ethics clearance.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) [Reference Number: EDUC_C1A_24_048].

ORCID

Adrian Fernandes https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2044-6781

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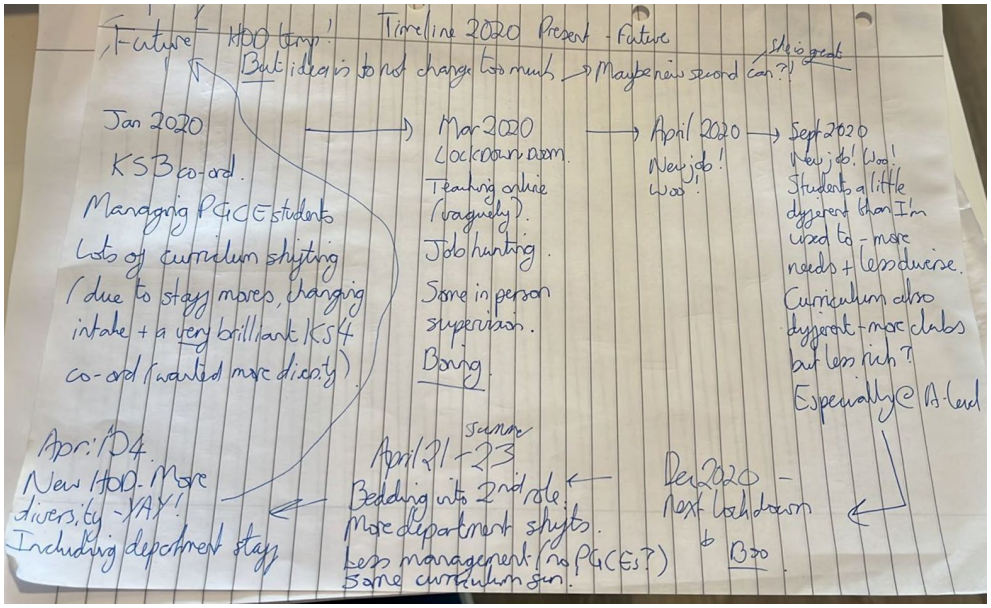
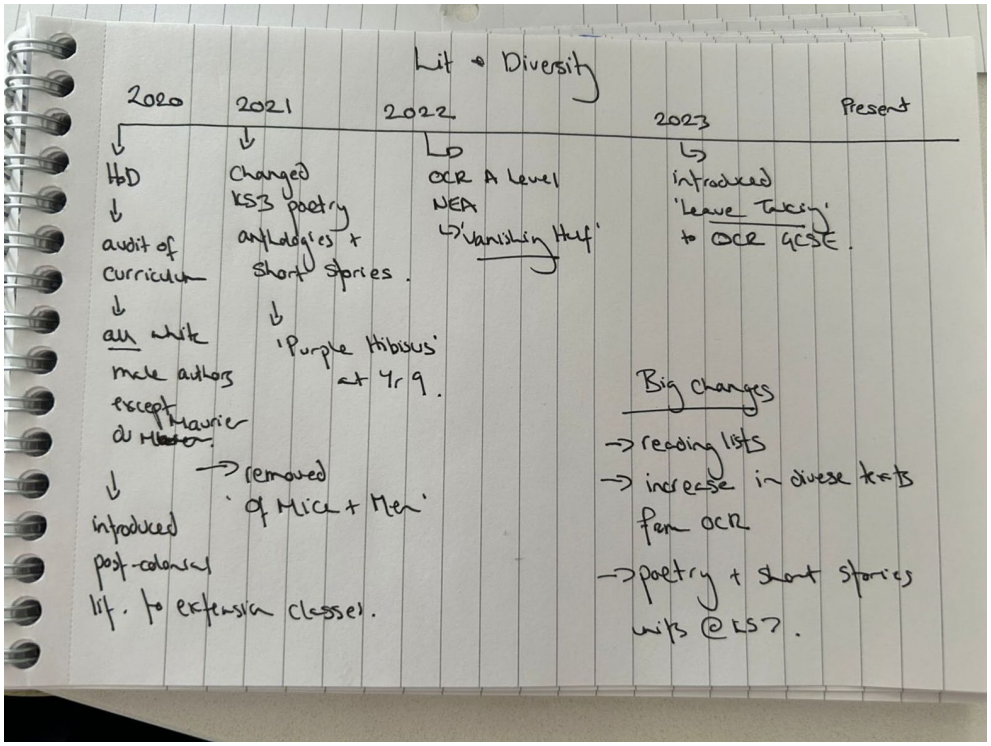
APPENDIX A

Participant 2's timeline



APPENDIX B

Participant 3's timeline



APPENDIX C

Participant 10's timeline