**Curriculum and Cultural Capital Challenged: The persistence of the single story**

The world in which we live has abruptly changed. With constant reminder that we are living in “unprecedented times” it is hardly surprising that the discourses we use to shape and make sense of our world are changing. The coronavirus has forced us to examine many aspects of our personal and professional lives, it has taken away our freedoms, in some cases our jobs, in some cases our lives. So, as lockdown begins to ease, **where does this leave us?** How has this affected our sense of **who we are** and **how we see our profession?** How can we continue to work towards **creating wider opportunities** for the young people we teach in a time where **disadvantage** is increasing?

We hope these think pieces will encourage **debate and discussion** about how we feel as educators about **what we teach** and how we feel about our **English** **curriculum.** I write this piece as an English teacher with 25 years of experience working across a variety of schools in different social, cultural and economic contexts. I write this piece as a white woman who has been through a British education system. My educational experience is particularly relevant to my view of the world, the way I see things, my “way of seeing” **Berger** (1972). Arguably, as a privileged white woman living in a rich country, I have had a multitude of opportunities at my feet and many options. But what did I learn about English Literature and how similar or different was my experience to that of the students I teach some 25 years later?

In my view, as English teachers we are up against it. The curriculum at **KS 4** is predominantly white and male, it is Eurocentric and privileges the traditional canon in terms of set texts and examination papers. Is it that some exam boards just pay lip surface to diversity by including a few poets from different cultures and traditions in their anthologies? AQA also include Meera Syal’s ***Anita and Me*** as a modern text option but if we are looking for diversity then we will be disappointed, it is limited. We have to challenge this.

Edexcel made some changes to their syllabus in **September 2019** with the addition of two plays: ***The Empress*** by Tanika Gupta and ***Refugee Boy*** by Benjamin Zephaniah (adapted for the stage by Lemn Sissay) and two novels: **Coram Boy** by Jamila Gavin and **Boys Don’t Cry** by Malorie Blackman. These texts were not on the original syllabus could be seen as a sign that there is an appetite for change and some resulting action. By positioning these texts on the syllabus something important is being said. It is significant. These changes have the potential to affect how we define English Literature and what is **“in”** and what is **“out”** in terms of syllabus requirements. It is an important change that we welcome.

 When I reflect upon my own education, my exposure to writers who weren’t just white and male only really began at A level. In the 1980’s the curriculum at GCSE wasn’t diverse. Luckily for me I was introduced to **Alice Walker and Maya** **Angelou at Post 16 and** was encouraged to explore **more** than the traditional English Literary canon. This was because I had a teacher who was inspiring, she wanted us to read stories that would broaden our view of the world, stories that represented a diversity of writers. The college I attended had a diverse student population and looking back I realise she must have been aware of the need to engage her students. She wanted us to learn to share more than just one “story.”

At university the curriculum became much broader and deeper. Voices which had previously been marginalised were now privileged and given centre stage. If you look at the modules offered in many universities today, particularly the “newer” ones then you will find a plethora of options- from **Black American** **Literature** to **Post-colonial writers** and **Writing in Multi-cultural Britain.** It is my view that we need to take inspiration from these offers. Why should this level of diversity only be open to students at undergraduate level?

 It is widely documented that the changes Gove brought to the GCSEs in 2015 really did “white wash” the entire curriculum and the overall experience for students. This brings us to consider what is important in designing a curriculum and who decides it. As Christine Counsell (2018) points out, “it’s all about power.” What should stay and what should go? Government ministers have decided what should stay, they hold the power. Texts that students are examined on, traditionally Shakespeare, Pre 19th century romantics, modern playwrights and poets of “note” are considered to be essential for ensuring that we are building students “cultural capital.” This justification is really interesting. **Whose** cultural capital are we serving?

 As teachers we are told that students need, “**Cultural capital”** – we must help them to “have more of it.” Cultural capital was defined by the sociologist **Pierre Bourdieu** originally in 1970s, it was a way of describing how power in society was transferred and maintained. In education we have been conditioned to believe that if students have more of this thing called “cultural capital” then they will do better. They will be better equipped to answer their exam questions and therefore their life chances are enhanced. Of course, anyone can see how this is beneficial. It is our job as educators to help students pass exams. It is our job to help them succeed. We need to “teach them the culture” that will enhance their chances of “capital.” But what if that culture is so far from anything that is meaningful or engaging for a student? **What if that definition of culture is narrow and confining?**

The work of the **Cultural Learning Alliance** brings many central questions about cultural capital to the fore. Quite simply, it challenges it. It challenges the current definition adopted by Ofsted about what might constitute the “best” of what is **thought and said** as there is a danger that it could be limiting, historical and fixed. **Who** defines what the best is and with what criteria? Can’t “**the best**” change and involve? Culture is dynamic and organic, surely our education system should acknowledge this? Surely our English curriculum should reflect this?

It is my view that we need to make the most of the **freedom** that we have at **KS 3** to provide an exciting and diverse curriculum. We need to exploit this in English. But what of KS 4? Quite simply, we need to fight for change. We need to make our voices heard at national level so that the curriculum going forward is in our students’ best interests. The curriculum needs to build relevant “cultural capital” for living in our time. Texts should be meaningful for students, they should light the fire for English and help our students to explore their sense of self.

As a community of English teachers we need to make our voices heard. We need to find ways of working with the “giants” the hold the power, OFQUAL, exam boards and DFE. As a multi-academy trust we have an important place in the educational landscape in the South West. The **shape** of the **English GCSE in Literature** and **Language** has to speak to our students. They have to be able to find something within it which speaks to them. It is only through sharing a multitude of stories that we can begin to explore our own identities and begin to write our own.

**Jayne Selway**

Senior SLE for English