**We need to talk about diversity**

Diversity is very much at the vanguard of educational conversations at the moment, driven to the fore by the tragic passing of George Floyd and the subsequent higher elevation of the Black Lives Matter movement in public consciousness.

As part of our everyday role as English teachers, we encourage and develop our students’ ability to read, to talk and to write. We spend time researching and resourcing approaches that will allow students to actively engage with the learning.We spend time creating lessons where we differentiate for ability, for outcome, for assessment. But how much time do we spend creating a classroom environment where every single person is seen and heard?

As a Bristol collective of schools, we are fortunate to have students from a wide range of diverse backgrounds. But how well are we serving them? How well are we ensuring that – through our curriculum – all these students are able to connect with the topics, the themes, the stories that they encounter? How well are we demonstrating to all these students – through our curriculum - that their lives matter?

There cannot be a teacher among us who does not deplore the inequitable division of our society in Britain.

We as teachers are in a unique and very privileged position. What we deliver in our classrooms has a great impact on developing minds. And for that reason, we should very carefully consider how we use that privilege.

Ultimately, our job is to create well-rounded, educated global citizens.

And without a concerted effort to teach a powerfully diverse curriculum, we will miss the chance to educate our students about how they fit and how they are connected in our society.

In her TED talk “*The Danger of a Single Story*” author and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes that: “*The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar*.”

The talk raises the question of cultural awareness and its importance in understanding people and the world at large. Only hearing a single story about another person or country results in vital misunderstandings; creates a disconnect between people of different cultures and also results in an imbalance of power with the dominant culture in ascendance.

Adichie ends her talk by saying: *“Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity […] when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise”.*

So what does this mean for us as teachers?

Basically, we need to utilise our unique and privileged position to ensure that the single story is not in ascendance. We ***can*** eradicate bias in the curriculum. We ***can*** educate all our students to have a comprehensive and balanced understanding of British history. We ***can*** help them develop an appreciation and mutual respect for diverse perspectives, contributions and cultures.

And particularly for us teachers of English, we need to think about what we are teaching, since so much of what we teach in English is about telling stories. Booker prize winning author Bernadine Evaristo writes that *“Fiction is […] an incredibly effective way of delving into human psychology and behaviour and thereby deepens our understanding of each other”.*

We need to create a curriculum that is a meaningful and balanced representation of our students who are, after all, a microcosm of Britain. We need to think about how we are packaging it, shaping it and uncovering it. For as Bennie Kara (Deputy Head at Bemrose School) says, “*Diversity can’t be a bolt-on to your curriculum*.”

Embracing the concept of diversity in education is important in terms of creating a culture of unconditional acceptance. When a student feels unwelcome or alienated for any reason, they cease to flourish as a student and as a person. Conversely, when a student is able to recognise aspects of their identity in the content they are presented with, they are then more able to connect with the topics and concepts at hand, enabling them to more actively engage. Kelly Hogan, a professor at the University of North Carolina, observes that *“feelings of isolation weaken a student’s ability to retain information and thus developing a sense of belonging could provide the support to thrive.”* Therefore, sending the right messages to students is critical not only in creating a classroom culture of unconditional acceptance but also in supporting achievement for all students.

But we also need to be careful how we go about it. Diversity in the curriculum is not just about including ethnicity, women, LGBTQ+, religion etc at the expense of the current one we have. Aurora Reid in “The researchEd Guide to The Curriculum (2020) writes: “*When considering the English curriculum, we cannot erase writers of colour but nor should we deny the foundational place in the world of Dickens, Hardy and Bronte. We need our students to read Jane Eyre but we need them to read Wide Sargasso Sea too. We have to teach all of it: what has been remembered and what has been forgotten and how this came to be.”*

Good literature should be one of the main guiding principles for our English curriculum no matter who the author. Yet we should be mindful of our selection of texts for as Adichie says: “*Stories can be used to empower and to humanise*”.

Despite the constraints we are under through the reality of the content of the National Curriculum – bound as it is by its colonial and political agenda, and driven by the need to achieve success at GCSE – we could still select texts that reflect our demographic realities. For example, at KS4 why select ‘Macbeth’ and not ‘Merchant of Venice’, which deals with issues surrounding the representation of women, prejudice and intolerance? At KS3, where are we telling the stories of counter perspectives, achievements and contributions to British society?

We at the CLF need to think more deeply about what we’re teaching because if we don’t, then we’re not teaching well. Our CLF English curriculum should explicitly seek to distance itself from discrimination through the active inclusion of texts which challenge the single story, otherwise we perpetuate those vital misunderstandings which “*make[s] our recognition of our equal humanity difficult”* (Adichie).

As we prepare our students to live in a diverse world, let us remember this from Nelson Mandela: “*Education is the greatest weapon which you can use to change the world*.”

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