

Companion guide: *Sparking conversation about curriculum change*

Spark something **powerful**



Sparking conversation about curriculum change

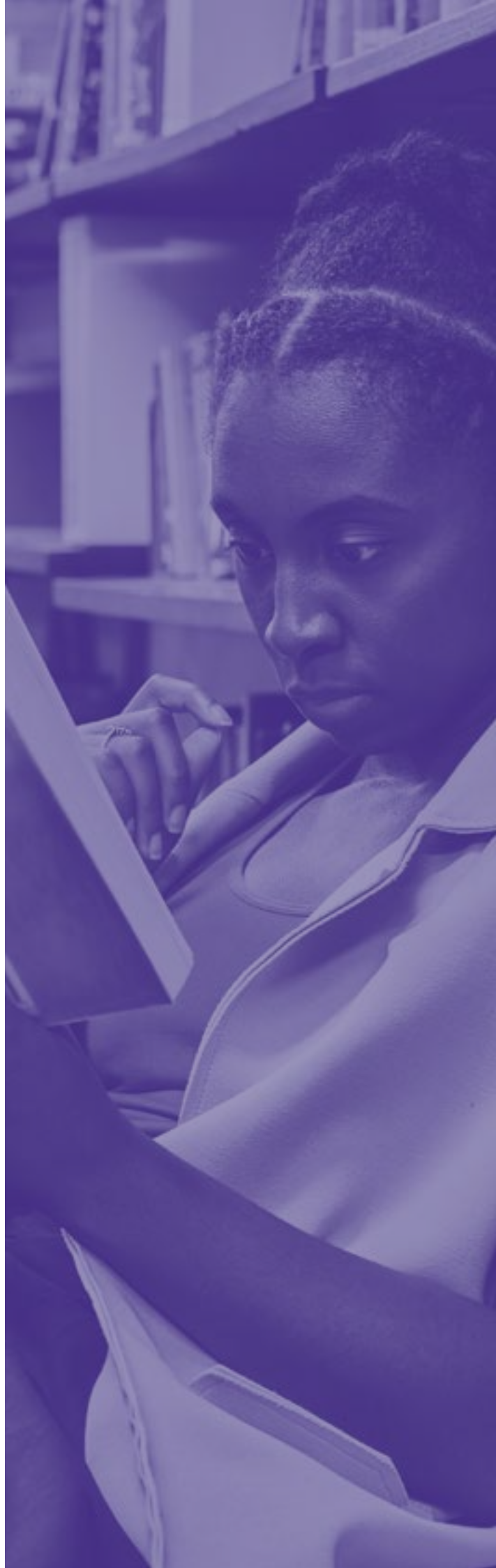
Designing an inclusive, diverse curriculum can be approached in many different and equally-valid ways. Every school is different – what works for one school won't necessarily be right for another. What diversity and inclusivity looks like in an English teaching context will vary depending on a number of factors (including your school's context; the expertise and experience of the department etc). Wherever you are, we can all agree that this is something that, as practitioners, we all need to think about and act on for the subject to evolve and for the good of future generations of learners.

This resource provides a set of prompts to spark and enrich discussions about curriculum design. It doesn't seek to be prescriptive or definitive, and is one tool you can add to your repertoire.

At AQA questions matter – so whatever decisions you're making, the questions provided here make a useful starting point.

Before applying the framework suggested in this resource, you might find it helpful to read of our ['Recommended Reading: A research digest of diversity and inclusion in English teaching'](#) or have it close to hand, as some of the prompts and approaches here are an extension of the research literature.

We've structured this simply according to two phases: Curriculum conversations followed by Curriculum planning. Though we acknowledge that this process, in practice, is likely to be more fluid than the linear approach proposed here.



Curriculum conversations

We've collated a range of big questions for you to take stock of before you commit to changing your curriculum in some way. These considerations have been grouped according to three umbrellas: your teaching context; your curriculum; and your knowledge and practice.

Your teaching context

A sensible starting point before making any change is to review your current teaching context. These prompts will help you to take an aerial view to ensure any change is aligned with the priorities of the whole school and wider community.

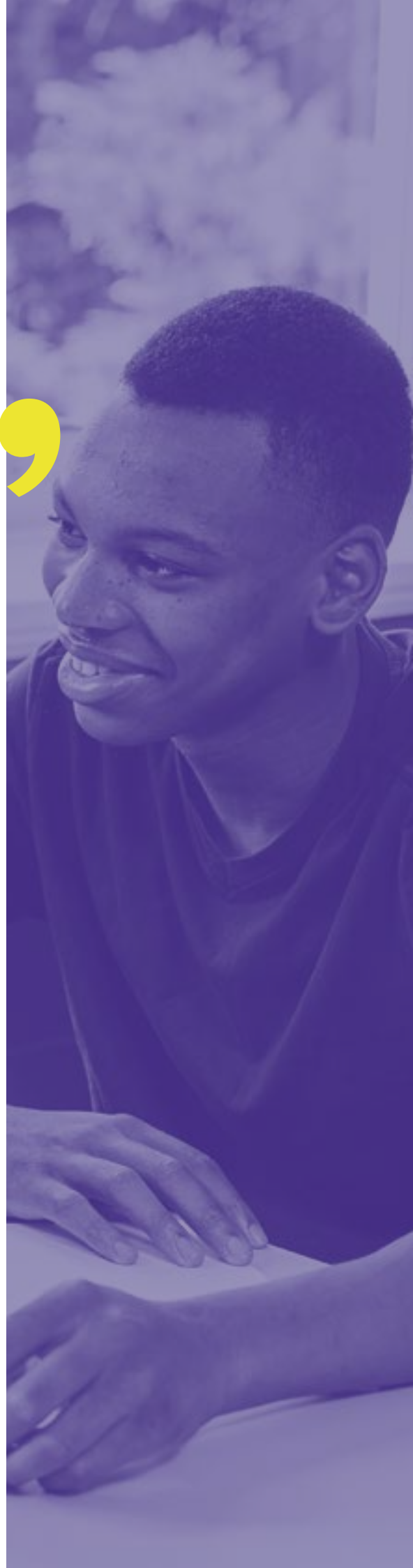
Your school and community

- What are the core ideas and values that you hold as a school?
- What is the school ethos and how is this reflected in (or challenged by) your curriculum?
- Are there any wider, social causes your school stands in solidarity with?
- How does your curriculum support your school's responsibility to develop your learners as positively contributing members of society?

Your learners

- What's the demographic of your student population (in terms of gender, ethnicity, faith, special education needs and disabilities, for example)?
- Can you articulate the underpinning needs and priorities of learners (academically, culturally, socially and spiritually)?
- Is there a pressing issue in the demographic you serve which your school is responding to?
- Do you teach texts which act as mirrors of your learners' life experience? ie what (or who) do your learners need to see reflected in the literature they read?
- Do you teach texts which act as windows for your learners? ie What different voices/narratives/experiences do your learners need to see in the literature they read?

If you're not familiar with the analogy of books being mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors as coined by Dr Rudine Sims Bishop, you can read a summary on page 5 of our [Resource and support guide: a research digest of diversity and inclusion in English teaching \(aqa.org.uk\)](#)



Your curriculum

A school curriculum needs to both meet the social, cultural and academic needs of its learners and deliver the national curriculum in a way that is inspiring and aspirational. For English, there are many choices to be made and what texts to teach is one of them. We need to be able to answer questions which probe how the curriculum content has been selected and structured in the way it has, and why the texts chosen support this rationale.

Curriculum at large

- What does your curriculum currently look like?
- What are the big themes that give coherence to your curriculum design?
- How do the texts you've chosen to teach 'talk to' each other?
- How have you built synergy/continuity between the Key Stages? Are there broad literary contexts which build a curriculum narrative from Key Stage 3 to 4 and 5? Are there texts which foster this alignment on your learners' learning journey in English?



Choice of texts

- When did you last audit the literature you teach? Are you aware of whether what you're teaching is ahead of the curve or follows the mainstream?
- Considering your selection of literature, how well represented are different groups and authors (considering gender, ethnicity, race and other protected characteristics)?
- Is the representation of a particular group what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to as a 'single story'? Or are a variety of narratives represented? Is how a place/people represented generally positive or negative? Is it reinforcing existing (harmful?) stereotypes, or offering a new narrative? Is the representation current or historical?
- Once you've established what/who is represented on your curriculum, and how, then consider where (in the sense of the genre coverage)? Historically learners only encountered a writer of colour through poetry and the poems from different cultures and traditions anthology has left a legacy. Do writers of colour hold space across genre/modes/text types?
- What gaps or spaces are there currently for different types of representation? What is absent?
- The [Lit in Colour report](#) comments on the current demographic of the teaching profession and the consequences of its majority white population – the impact on uptake of the subject at A-level and university, and the subsequent ripple effect on entrants to the profession. Considering your curriculum through the lens of racial diversity, how do you ensure that English is not positioned as a 'White subject'? What texts are included in your curriculum which endorse (implicitly or explicitly) colonial perspectives or the 'white gaze'? What additional postcolonial contexts and perspectives could you include and where/how will you do this?

If auditing literature on your curriculum is overdue you could use and adapt this free tool provided by UKLA [Microsoft Word - KS3 literature audit.docx \(ukla.org\)](#) or this one [Lit in Colour - tools for secondary schools | Teaching Resources \(tes.com\)](#)

You could compare what you teach at Key Stage 3 with the research findings in this report [Microsoft Word - Research Report What literature texts are being taught in Years 7 to 9.docx \(ukla.org\)](#)

If you're not familiar with the concept of 'single story', you can read a summary of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's influential TED talk 'The danger of a single story' on page 6 of our [Resource and support guide: a research digest of diversity and inclusion in English teaching \(aqa.org.uk\)](#)

You can read more about the long-lasting effects of poetry on legacy GCSE English Literature specifications in [Full article: Teaching poems by authors of colour at key stage 3: categorising what is taught \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

See 'The racial profile of the English teaching profession' section from page 35 of the report [Lit-in-Colour-research-report.pdf \(penguin.co.uk\)](#)

For a brief introduction to postcolonial literature read Professor Ato Quayson's blog post for The British Academy [What is postcolonial literature? | The British Academy](#)

Your knowledge and practice

The learning you've undertaken as an individual and as a department will shape your next steps and priorities. It's important to start by establishing what you already know; what your shared knowledge is as a team; what expertise, learnings and personal experiences you individually bring to the team.

Teacher knowledge of equality, diversity and inclusion

- How will you develop your own and/or your team's understanding of diversity and inclusion in English?
- What reading/CPD opportunities about diversity and inclusion in English teaching (or more broadly) have you undertaken as an individual/faculty? Does this include critical literary theory?
- Do you have a shared language of inclusion?
- What gaps are there in your knowledge? How will you approach filling them?
- If you need a steer, we've curated some of the most influential and freely accessible pieces of research on this subject in our [Recommended Reading: A research digest of diversity and inclusion in English teaching.](#)

Teacher knowledge of texts:

- How do you usually go about finding out about new texts? Where do you source credible/quality information and resources from?
- How necessary/important is it for you as teacher to front-load your teaching with a foundation of knowledge about a new text you're teaching?
- How do you allow space for exploration that enables learners to bring their own cultural capital, experience and frame of reference to the reading of a text?
- How comfortable/confident are you in teaching a text which is outside your own lived experience and/or the lived experience of your learners?
- If the text addresses sensitive or contentious subject matter, how do you prepare/carefully plan for this?
- How do you share knowledge and resources with other members of the team?


The training company Diverse Educators Ltd (which grew from the grassroots network #DiverseEd) provide a glossary of terms in their Resources download [DE Resources Brochure Sept 22 fin.pdf - Google Drive](#) (see from page 18)

Curriculum planning

We know that the work of designing an inclusive curriculum goes deeper than introducing a more diverse range of books to your learners' reading diet and no book on its own can be in and of itself inclusive. However, one outcome of having engaged in rich conversations prompted by the questions above might be that you do decide to introduce a new text to your curriculum. The following additional prompts will inform your preparation and planning prior to teaching a new text to your learners.

Planning to teach a new text

- Given the school context, have you considered what the best ways-in to the new text would be to spark curiosity, engagement and enjoyment of reading for your learners? Is there an opportunity to link the text with a current/local issue or something that would resonate for your learners? What opportunities does the text offer?
- On the flipside, what aspects of your own school context might present challenges in the teaching of this text? How will you address and overcome these? What aspects of the text may be unfamiliar for your learners? (eg vocabulary, dialect, background context etc.) How will you fill gaps in knowledge to help develop understanding and insight of these aspects?
- What aspects of the text are unfamiliar to you? If the text explores contexts/themes/ideas outside your lived experience how will you build familiarity and confidence to teach it?
- Where might your own learners have more knowledge/ experience and how might it be appropriate to use this (or show sensitivity to this)? How can you draw on and draw out the cultural capital of the learners in your class?
- If your text deals with sensitive issues, how will you create a safe environment for you and your learners to explore them in? What boundaries might you need to establish before reading the text with learners? Thinking this through will help to minimise the impact of encountering some aspect of the text that some learners might find upsetting or personally triggering. It will also mitigate any tension or insensitive reactions from other learners in the class.
- Is there any prior learning or reading which can be drawn on to give learners a way-in to the text? This 'intelligent backwards planning approach is advocated by Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman. How could it be applied to foreshadow the themes/issues/contexts that learners will encounter in this new text. (To learn how one school went about this, using the KS3 reader Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line by Deepa Anappara as a precursor to teaching Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol at GCSE. Take a look at the materials from our Curriculum Conversations and Diversity: Part 1 course which can be downloaded from Centre Services).
- How will you create implementation phases for the new text? You might start by introducing the new text to a single class and then scale this up to the whole department. How will teaching materials be road-tested? What knowledge and support would be required for teachers to adopt the text and the deliver with confidence?



HMCI's commentary: recent primary and secondary curriculum research published 11 October 2017 Ofsted [HMCI's commentary: recent primary and secondary curriculum research - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/644447/HMCI-commentary-recent-primary-and-secondary-curriculum-research-11-October-2017.pdf)

Planning to teach 'old' texts in a new way

The diversification of the curriculum doesn't have to start (nor end) with introducing a new text. If this isn't the right approach at this time, for whatever reason, there are other ways to achieve a more inclusive curriculum.

As a minimum you could consider how the texts you currently teach could invite conversations about diversity and inclusion.

So-called canonical texts, particularly those pre-dating 1900 are problematic due to the contexts in which they're rooted, reflecting the questionable attitudes and values of their day. Rather than glossing over these challenging aspects, seize the opportunity to confront them, interrogate and open up conversations. This approach encourages your learners to approach the study of literature with curiosity and agency; view books more as cultural artefacts that hold more significance than purely being vehicles to achieving a qualification.

In addition, you could consider how the texts you currently teach exist in conversation with other texts.

You can ensure your teaching of a text is inclusive and diverse by making connections to a range of other texts (across times, spaces, cultures, genres) which could be used for different purposes: to contrast/challenge, confirm/enrich ideas in the set text etc. This approach gives learners exposure to a range of literature and supports a more integrated approach to the teaching of English. (This approach is explored in relation to teaching *An Inspector Calls* in our Curriculum Conversations and Diversity: Part 2 course available to download from Centre Services).

There will be many more alternative and innovative ways of changing your curricula – the suggestions here serve as springboard to spark deep and meaningful conversations about inclusion and diversity in English.

Teachers are also learners. There are many resource providers and organisations who offer high quality support for free. For inspiration in applying this approach to the teaching of Shakespeare (for example), try Shakespeare's Globe's podcast [Such Stuff – series 6 features 5 episodes which explore Shakespeare and race](#) [Such Stuff podcast | Discover | Shakespeare's Globe \(shakespearesglobe.com\)](#)

If you want to explore this approach further you could consider [The Lit in Colour alternative reading guide to: An Inspector Calls \(penguin.co.uk\)](#)

Contact us

We'd love to hear from you if you've used this resource and found it helpful.

Tel: 0161 953 7504

Email: english-gcse@aqa.org.uk

Twitter: @AQAEnglish

Spark something **powerful**

aqa.org.uk/spark-something

aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2023 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.
AQA Education (AQA) is a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723). Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

June 2023