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# Making spaces for collaborative action and learning: Reflections on teacher-led decolonising initiatives from a professional learning network in England

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## Abstract

This article draws on the experiences of teachers and teacher educators within the “Bristol Decolonising Network”, an informal professional learning network based in South West England, to share examples of teacher-led decolonising/antiracist initiatives. The seven vignettes presented cover a range of subject areas across the English Secondary school curriculum, with varying rationales, foci, forms and intended outcomes. For this Special Issue, we look across these cases to consider links between teacher-led decolonising and antiracist initiatives and professional learning. We suggest that professional learning is both a condition for, and outcome of, teachers' engagement in such work; and that extending collaboration beyond hierarchical and institutional boundaries is a key enabler for progress on this agenda.

## KEYWORDS

antiracist education, decolonising education, professional learning networks, teacher professional learning

There is no data for this article beyond the vignettes included.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to the Special Issue by considering the nature of teacher professional learning in the context of teacher-led decolonising and antiracist initiatives in England. We draw on the accounts of members of the Bristol Decolonising Network (BDN), an informal professional learning network of teachers and teacher educators which was established in 2021 as a means of bringing together a diverse group of educators working in this space to share information and resources, provide mutual support, and enable collaborative work and action. Although the network centres on Bristol, its membership includes more than 60 educators working across South West England and further afield.

As the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate, there is growing interest in antiracist/decolonising work in schools across England, and a small but growing record of practical initiatives in this policy context (e.g., Gandolfi, 2021; Glowach, 2022; Glowach et al., *in press*; Kennett et al., 2021; Moncrieffe et al., 2020; Nayeri & Rushton, 2022; The Decolonising Education Group, 2022). The pressure for antiracist action in Bristol has grown steadily over the past 5 years. A key moment was the publication of the Runnymede Trust report *Bristol: a city divided?* (Elahi et al., 2017, henceforth “Runnymede Report”) which showed stark inequalities in average educational attainment between young Black learners and their White peers. In accounting for these disparities the report highlighted: “the unrepresentativeness of the curriculum, lack of diversity in teaching staff and school leadership, and poor engagement with parents” (*ibid.*, p. 1). The report came as a shock to many educators working in the city, triggering a series of “city conversations” (Cork, 2018), followed by the launch of city-wide curriculum projects which centre Black perspectives and contributions, One Bristol Curriculum and CARGO.<sup>1</sup> There have been numerous other initiatives in the city led by teachers, schools, subject communities and others (Glowach et al., *in press*).

In June 2021, several of the current paper's authors participated in an event titled *Decolonising the Curriculum in Bristol: across the subjects, from school to university*, which was hosted by the University of Bristol as part of the annual Continuous Professional Development (CPD) festival *Teacherfest*. One outcome from this event was the establishment of the Bristol Decolonising Network (BDN) as a means of bringing together educators working in this space. The BDN, which primarily operates through WhatsApp, has held several in-person meetings over the past year, and organised the “Southwest Anti-Racist Education Forum” in July 2022 with funding from Research England through the University of Bristol's “Enhancing Research Culture” fund.<sup>2</sup>

Use of the term *decolonising* in our network's name is not unproblematic. The UK government takes an oppositional stance with respect to decolonising education. For example, the report of the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (HMG, 2021, commonly known as the ‘Sewell Report’) refers to “negative calls for ‘decolonising’ the curriculum” exemplified by “the banning of White authors ... token expressions of Black achievement ... [and] bringing down statues” (p. 8). In academic debates, too, there have been calls to counter superficial or figurative uses of this term. For example, Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that injunctions to “‘decolonize student thinking’ turn decolonizing into a metaphor” and subsequently an “attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (p. 1). Our use of this term reflects engagement with thinkers from the Global South such as Julius Nyerere, Franz Fanon and in particular Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whose essay *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) was shared by Kenyan teacher and co-founder of the BDN Tryphosa with other core members of the network. Ngũgĩ uses the term to challenge the worldviews and assumptions which were promulgated through colonial schooling during the British Empire, imposing racial hierarchies by devaluing African languages, cultures and achievements. In the context of schooling in England in the 21st Century, Tikly (2022) locates decolonising efforts within a

wider 'antiracist project' in education which seeks to challenge institutional racism and structures of White supremacy (Tikly, 2022).

For the present article, the lead author invited members of the BDN to contribute accounts of teacher-led initiatives they had been involved in as a basis for collaborative reflections on the relationship between teacher professional learning and antiracist/decolonial work. A better understanding of the ways in which professional learning is both a driver for, and outcome of, engagement in such activities is important for broader progress in this area. Of the BDN's membership, ten individuals wished to contribute to this piece, leading to seven sole or joint-authored "vignettes" of initiatives, presented in the following section. We did not seek to represent the full range of subject specialisms or phases of schooling, nor would this have been feasible, but the vignettes do reflect a diversity (if not comprehensive coverage) of subject areas and settings, with a focus at the secondary level through self-selection rather than by design. Alongside a description of a specific initiative, BDN contributors were asked to include details on the motivations for, and outcomes from, this work. Authors were invited to read each other's accounts, offer critical commentary to improve clarity, and discuss unifying themes in a Zoom meeting; all were given opportunities to edit their accounts. The lead author then used the themes identified through the course of our dialogue to frame the Discussion section of this article. We should note that authors' contributions to this article, like our participation in the network, is entirely voluntary and unpaid, based on the commitments and interests of those involved. The work reflects professional ethics and norms within the teaching professional community, rather than a university-based ethical review board, but is informed by, and consistent with, the principles outlined in BERA's (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018) guidelines.

In social research vignettes often take the form of hypothetical accounts which are used to elicit data about "people's perceptions, beliefs and meanings about specific situations" (Barter & Renold, 1999). The vignettes reproduced below are not hypothetical, but practitioners' reports of their experiences—individuals' testimonies, which are necessarily partial. However, given the paucity of British accounts of practical initiatives in education research literature, the value of such practitioner reflections is clear.

In the next section we present the seven vignettes, which cover a wide range of subject areas across the Secondary school curriculum, with varying rationales, foci, forms and outcomes. Racialised identities also vary: authors Jo, Lydia, Kate, Terra and Bathsheba are White; Tryphosa, Amy and Lisa are Black. Vignettes are grouped by professional role, i.e., teacher, subject lead, mentor, PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) subject lead, to aid consideration and comparison. We close by reflecting across these different initiatives to consider links between teachers' professional learning and their engagement in decolonising/antiracist work.

## **VIGNETTES OF ANTIRACIST/DECOLONIAL EDUCATION INITIATIVES**

### **My department's journey: Reimagining the canon in subject English**

Tryphosa Bennett, Teacher of English in a state secondary school.

Over the last two years, the teachers in my English Department have been on a process of interrogating our current curriculum and exploring ways to re-imagine the Western canon to make it inclusive. The main reason for this was to allow for the texts we studied to be reflective of the students we taught in terms of culture and identity. From my personal perspective as a Kenyan, a reimagination of that canon involved the inclusion of African and post-colonial literature in my repertoire.

When I immigrated to England and wished to continue my teaching career, I was confronted with the need to be intimately knowledgeable of the Western canon. The *canonical* extracts and texts that I taught were all rooted in the human condition. The fragility of it, the strength and resilience of it. These issues were *also* at the core of the literature that I was intimately knowledgeable of, and that was clearly not part of the canon. I have always felt that there is a need to unpick the perceived 'superiority' of the Western canon and interrogate how minority groups navigate this landscape. The most important work being done is helping these groups regain their voices within the canon.

Action in my department was galvanised by the George Floyd tragedy, which seemed to be a moment of awakening, signalling an urgency for Black culture, history and literature to be recognised and celebrated. It was during this time that colleagues and I re-examined our English curriculum and identified imbalances in representation.

While many teachers of English look at whole texts to gauge diversity in the curriculum, the extracts we use in teaching Language—both fiction and non-fiction—are often overlooked. That is where we began. By creating a bank of resources with both fiction and non-fiction extracts that were written by people of colour, about people of colour. For example, one set of resources we developed drew on a Guardian article about Benjamin Zephaniah's childhood (Zephaniah, 2018) and a speech by Idris Elba about his childhood. This allowed our students to examine and discuss how things may have changed or not changed for a Black boy living in England.

We were very conscious of the need to encourage our students to investigate and explore positive stories about Blackness and about people of colour to try and counter the stereotypical view of stories of Blackness being only about enslavement, poverty and political instability. So sharing stories of success and joy became integral in our search for extracts to include in our curriculum. My department now has a 'decolonisation' folder, which includes an extract from Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and articles celebrating Black excellence. In terms of longer texts, one book which I've found an absolute joy to teach is Candy Gourlay's 'Bone Talk', which I have used with Year 7, the first year of Secondary school. Even at this age (11–12), I've found that students are able to engage with and understand the concepts of colonisation and empire.

Beyond enriching the canon, my department has recognised the importance of teachers actively initiating wider conversations about the disparities in our systems. These conversations almost always go beyond race to encompass dynamics in relation to gender, class, identity and minority. We have started consciously and intentionally discussing decolonisation in our department meetings.

## Challenging 'epistemologies of ignorance' in science education

Lydia Donaldson, Teacher of Science in a state secondary school.

Amid the Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020, a group of students at my school wrote an open letter to senior leadership requesting changes to the curriculum:

... racism continues to uphold violent and unequal power structures around the world and therefore we believe that the school needs to expand its teaching ... to adequately acknowledge this.

It was these demands from students which prompted my own MSc dissertation research which looked at the ways in which school science conveys 'epistemologies of ignorance' (Mills, 2007) with regard to race, implicitly normalising ideologies of coloniality, patriarchy and capitalism. This work began with an analysis of the General Certificate of Secondary

Education (GCSE) Science curriculum texts (specifications, textbooks, and exam questions), which not only indicated a dominance of White male contributions, but the portrayal of extractive capitalism as necessary and inevitable.

Interviews with Year 12 (16–17 year-olds) who had recently completed GCSE Science suggested that these conceptions of science were reproduced by students. Although those interviewed were not necessarily the same students who wrote the open letter, I had expected the interviews to go differently. When presented in the interview with images of the 50 White, male (bar two) scientists named in the textbook (Haber, Rutherford, Le Chatelier ...) students recognised the homogeneity but responded with pragmatism that 'perhaps that was just who did the science back then'.

The interviews suggested that science is perceived by students as non-agential, objective, apolitical, authoritative, and dominated by White males. This link between the presentation of science in GCSE texts and students' conceptions of it suggests that school has a key role in informing students' views of science. Consequently, this research suggests the value of efforts to incorporate a 'pluriversity' of ideas into GCSE science, to complement modern science and place it alongside other knowledges and worldviews.

Inclusion of non-male, non-White scientists and their stories is a valid and urgent place to start with decolonial teaching, for example, stories of non-White non-male scientists are included in my PowerPoints to address the imbalance in representation on exam board OCR's course.

However, decolonising school science requires a deeper epistemological overhaul to address the hidden values highlighted by text analysis and student interviews: the non-agential, objective, White male-dominated, apolitical and authoritative nature of science. It was through my readings of De Sousa Santos (2018) and Wall-Kimmerer (2013) that I came to recognise non-Western understandings of the world that challenge the colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist messages of GCSE science. For example, the natural world can often be portrayed as a 'resource' (see exam board AQA's 'Using Resources' section in GCSE Chemistry) and sustainability is considered as a means of ensuring we do not run out of more 'resources'. Wall-Kimmerer (2013) offers teachings from the Potawatomi people of North America as an alternative to the expropriative attitude dominant in the West and in school science.

My research was supported by a Headteacher who engages with issues of diversity and embraces antiracist teaching. This supportive culture meant I could undertake research in the school and work with my colleagues to identify areas of the science curriculum where there were opportunities for change. Networks such as the Bristol Decolonising Network and Decolonising Science help maintain momentum and allow sharing of ideas between schools.

Developing a more holistic science curriculum, linking science to issues of environmentalism, equality of opportunity, and contributions from different knowledge systems has allowed to students to see beyond the often prescriptive, 'knowledge-rich' nature of science at GCSE and A-level, to view the discipline as something they are invited to be a part of. Discussing issues beyond the prescribed knowledge, for example the value of the natural world alongside the Haber process, has ignited debate and improved the oracy of all my students, particularly the quieter ones. This may be because a departure from the colonial 'universal and objective' framing of science (as reflected in the student interviews) to a more participatory education means that students feel more invited to contribute. Consequently, this consideration of other knowledge-systems in science might even make science education 'stick' better—only more research will tell!



## Redressing silences around race in the English classroom

Amy Saleh & Evie Hemmings, Teachers of English in a state-funded further education college for 16–18 year-olds.

On joining our institution in 2021 it was clear that many colleagues did not feel fully equipped to facilitate discussions about race in literature, nor were they choosing texts which represented the ethnic diversity of the UK. Following a management decision to change our college's exam boards from AQA to Pearson Edexcel, we used the opportunity to address the silence on issues of race by introducing texts that could be used to engage our learners in the study of GCSE English Language.

Finding ways to motivate college learners is a significant part of our jobs, because most have gone through school without achieving a GCSE in English. When asked, learners said they never really liked English because it is boring, old, and irrelevant. In an icebreaker lesson, Amy showed her learners some authors and titles to see who and what they knew. Predictably, a majority of them identified Shakespeare and remembered *A Christmas Carol*. Not one of them recalled any authors of colour.

As a Black, female English teacher, one of Amy's primary aims has been to extinguish the recurring illusion that English must be stale, pale, and overwhelmingly male. English was her favourite subject at school, but she left with this illusion, only discovering otherwise through her own reading at university. Another motivation for this work was addressing low levels of racial literacy. Race was almost a taboo subject for many of the White learners, and Amy felt that her Black and Brown learners seemed self-conscious having open dialogue about it. Whilst Amy identifies with this feeling of hypervisibility, especially on occasions where she is facilitating race talk as the only person of colour in the room, she recognises that if we are to build a racially literate society, we must acquire and develop racial literacy (Dlamini, 2002; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020).

To capitalise on the opportunity presented by switching exam boards, we decided to introduce some 21st century texts alongside the older texts required by the Conservative government curriculum reforms of 2014. We decided to avoid using the US context, as too often racism has been regarded as an issue occurring elsewhere rather than on our own doorstep (Olusoga, 2020). We shared ideas and the resources we had collated in a department meeting focused on curriculum planning. Due to the horizontal structure of our department, we had the autonomy to push through this agenda.

We have found learners to be highly engaged with the new curriculum. When looking at transactional writing, learners were given a letter written in the 1890s by a woman who complained about poor conditions for female factory workers. To complement this, they read footballer Marcus Rashford's letter to the government in 2020 (Varley, 2020), in which he requested a U-turn on the decision to cancel the food voucher scheme over the school holidays. This allowed for discussion around the role of Black influencers, the racism faced by Black football players, and the intersection of race and class.

To teach film reviews, we started by studying two films. The first was 'Rocks' (2019), an authentic portrayal of girlhood, featuring a racially diverse cast. Responses from Black and Brown learners drew parallels between the film and aspects of their own lives. For many White learners, this was the first time they had seen a film centred on Black Britishness, and some of their comments prompted Amy to address stereotypical ideas of Black femininity.

Comparing experiences of racism in 'Queenie' by Candice Carty-Williams (2020) and Akala's in book 'Natives' (2018) prompted previously disengaged learners to contribute in class. Learners began reflecting on the complexities of interracial relationships and how racist incidents are (or aren't) dealt with in school. A learner from one of Amy's smaller classes felt safe enough to be open about the challenges of growing up as a mixed-race

child in a largely White school and having parents of different races. That was as pivotal a learning moment for Amy as it was for the rest of the group.

We benefit from regular debriefs after delivering the same lesson, which gives us a chance to compare class responses, and how we have dealt with these. We often find that our different racial backgrounds influence the outcomes of our lessons, and reflecting on this can inform future practice.

## **Agency, courage and intelligence: Developing an antiracist history education in a diverse school**

Kate Smee, Head of Humanities Department in a state secondary school.

Our History department has moved from working towards a diverse curriculum, to explicitly aiming to create an antiracist curriculum. We started by changing our teaching of the transatlantic slave trade to highlight accounts of resistance and enslaved people working for abolition, and include explicit teaching about how Black people were deliberately racialised. Our learnings from this subsequently filtered into many other parts of the curriculum.

We had been working for some years on diversifying our curriculum, but the murder of George Floyd and rise of the Black Lives Matter movement was a significant wake up call. Ours is a very diverse school, and through self-education and the support of colleagues we became aware that materials we had previously used were insensitive and embedding racialised stereotypes. For me personally, a key moment of self-reflection was prompted by the comments of a Black History teacher from another school, who in reflecting on her own schooling told me “what I needed to see in that classroom was Black people having agency and using their intelligence to challenge the situation”. This made me realise that very little of our curriculum would enable a Black student to feel empowered. Following discussions within our department, we decided to rewrite parts of our curriculum to ensure that Black people were represented as individuals with agency, courage and intelligence. We started with the transatlantic slave trade unit.

Our teaching of the transatlantic slave trade has completely changed, and students' responses have been inspiring. Students now discuss and write about the importance of loaded language such as ‘slave’ and why using a term like ‘enslaved person’ gives greater agency and respect. Many are able to discuss why it is important to include the voices of Black Caribbean writers in such a unit, and can also evaluate the contributions of active and passive resistance, making specific reference to the roles women played in resisting enslavement. Phrases like “women exploited the way they were underestimated by their enslavers to ....” have shown that through this unit enslaved people are seen as intelligent and dignified, with their humanity respected. Furthermore, students have been able to discuss the deliberate construction of racialisation for political and economic gain, and some have shared how this has informed their own reflections on lived experiences of racism.

In addition, the learning we have experienced through this work has flowed into many other areas of our curriculum. For example, when we looked at our Year 10 unit on America 1920–1973, we recognised that Black Americans were portrayed as passive victims in the specification and in our teaching. We have worked to address this by (for example) teaching about the Harlem Renaissance before we teach about the impact of systemic racism on Black American lives. We have also rewritten our work on the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s so it reflects the work of prior generations, and so leaders are portrayed as part of a movement, rather than conveying a simplistic hero/villain narrative. Our teaching of Race and Politics in the US on the A Level Government and Politics course now starts by looking at the deliberate construction of a racialised society to broaden contextual understanding.



We were supported in this work by leadership in my school, which is committed to creating and curating an antiracist curriculum. Black colleagues were willing to advise and support, and the school has provided cover to enable less confident staff to observe others teaching antiracist materials in order to gain expertise.

I made a significant personal commitment to improve my knowledge and understanding through reading texts such as *Why I am no Longer Talking to White People About Race* (Eddo-Lodge, 2017), podcasts such as *Seeing White* by John Biewen (2016), documentaries such as *13th* directed by Ava DuVernay (2016) and attending conferences run by organisations such as DiverseED. My work in this area has also been supported by local teacher networks that share resources, connections and inspiration. I often use such networks as a means of peer reviewing my teaching materials and seeking critical advice. These include BAME South West; Bristol Decolonising Network and Bristol History Teachers Collective. Nationally the Historical Association has also published a number of articles related to teaching about race and decolonising curricula.

## Challenging traditional mono-narratives in the English curriculum

Jo Jefferson, Head of English Department in a state secondary school.

Many White teachers in our school have been raised “not to see colour”, yet as our school community increasingly diversified, it became clear that such an unconscious approach was blinkered. This realisation was precipitated when the school appointed a Cultural Competence lead who established a BAME student committee that reported discriminatory incidents at school. The BLM protests in 2020 further galvanised the school community: we made podcasts, discussing questions that BAME students felt the school community should be able to answer, such as: ‘What is White privilege?’, ‘What is unconscious bias?’ ‘What are microaggressions?’

In our English faculty, texts such as Reni Eddo-Lodge's, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Jason Reynold's *Stamped* (2020) and Layla Saad's *Me and White Supremacy* (2021) were crucial in enabling the re-evaluation of our pedagogical approaches. We decided to revise the content and delivery of schemes of learning from Years 7–13, seeking to empower young people to interrogate mono-narratives and articulate their independent response to texts.

As part of Black History Month in 2019, we adapted our Year 9 scheme of learning to incorporate a celebration of Paul Stephenson, one of our school's House icons, and his revolutionary work. We also debated the concept of BHM, where students shared their views. A key message from student voice was the need for greater positive Black representation, a reoccurring comment being: “I don't just want to see myself as a slave.” However, when Paul Stephenson himself came to talk to a group of BAME students about representation and equal rights, he was at pains to stress to young people that, although history is painful, it must not be forgotten, a key reflection which has resonated. For example, after intense debate, we have decided to keep Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) in the curriculum, but will be challenging the reductive representation of Black experience by interweaving the text with a celebration of the Harlem Renaissance.

As a result of listening to the issues that inspired and motivated students, we adapted our GCSE language resources during the second lockdown. For example, students explored the debates surrounding the toppling of Colston's statue and wrote articles arguing who or what they would put on the plinth, whilst, inspired by Marcus Rashford's campaign for Free School Meals (Varley, 2020), they analysed his campaign letter.

The current Ofsted focus on curriculum intent, implementation and impact has helped facilitate our discussion about epistemic violence and encouraging critical debate with

canonical texts. To this end, teachers have worked together to embed heterogenous readings, developing their understanding of postcolonial readings in particular. For example, we consider the extent to which Imitaz Dharker's (1997) depiction of the slums of Mumbai mirrors Eurocentric, idealised notions of noble poverty in the Indian subcontinent.

At the centre of our work is a collaborative culture, wherein all members of our faculty engage as equals in fierce academic debate, propelling innovative curriculum design. It is significant to note that no official CPD time has been dedicated to these efforts; rather they have been driven by students and teachers seeking to reform curriculum content whilst also fulfilling top-down school improvement priorities.

Many young people in our school write with passion and authority about complex issues. In Year 9, study of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1999) deconstructs political rhetoric and explores the complex relationship between the individual and the state. Students compare Creon's speeches with others by Donald Trump and Michelle Obama, independently evaluating their varying powers of persuasion. Following this, students experience a carousel of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion topics and then write their own independently chosen speeches.

Year 7 students have just completed articles discussing the importance of non-traditional casting in terms of increasing Black representation, whilst in Year 8, a newly developed scheme of learning has introduced students to Bristol's vibrant contemporary poetry scene, via a consideration of the city's Romantic links to the early ideals of the French Revolution. Students prepared individual presentations of their favourite poems, encouraging a celebration of diverse voices, whilst also giving them voice.

Our next steps are to develop our understanding of intersectionality, especially in relation to the lived experiences of our young people. We will continue to involve student voice in decisions about curriculum and pedagogy.

## **Empowering student voice in discussions about race in literature**

Terra Glowach, English Subject Lead/Mentor & Bathsheba Wells Dion, Teacher of English in a state secondary school.

From 2019, Terra worked as Deputy Head of English to improve diversity, racial literacy, and oracy in the Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) curriculum at her inner-city Bristol school. The Runnymede Report (Elahi et al., 2017) and subsequent city conversations provided the impetus for this process (see Introduction), one outcome from which was the development of curricula which included the achievements of Black people and access to Black role models.

Terra chose the English and Media Centre's (McCallum, & James, 2018) anthology of short fiction *Diverse Shorts* as the core text for the first unit of study in Year 7. The shorts are diverse in terms of authorship and characters, and explicitly challenge negative stereotypes about a range of protected characteristics via positive and complex representations.

Resources from Voice 21, the national oracy education charity, were also used to build explorative discussion skills and racial literacy into the unit of work. The Voice 21 listening ladder (Figure 1) laid the groundwork for critical, empathetic discussions, and sentence stems were used to scaffold thoughtful responses to comments from peers (Gaunt & Stott, 2019). These tools enabled students to have extended class discussions about the themes of identity and discrimination without need for teacher intervention.

In September 2021, Bathsheba joined the school as an Early Career Teacher (ECT) and Terra was assigned as her mentor. Together they analysed whole-school student voice data on curriculum changes over the previous school year. English was the most frequently mentioned subject for improving the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, with students making particular note of *Diverse Shorts* and student-led, whole class discussions.

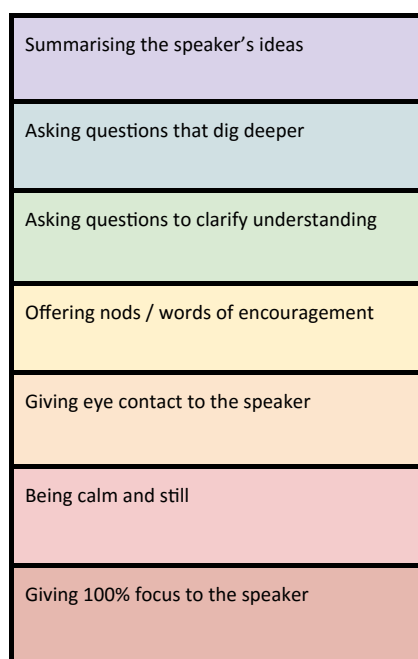


FIGURE 1 Voice 21 listening ladder

Bathsheba was keen to embed and enhance the work done so far in the Year 7 unit. Using mentoring meetings as a space to explore and develop the use of oracy skills in Year 7, Terra and Bathsheba read academic literature about using discussion to empower student voice through dialogic teaching. Their reading included Yandell's *The Social Construction of Meaning* (2016), Gibbons' *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning* (2020), and Janks' *Doing Critical Literacy* (Janks & Dixon, 2014). Bathsheba was particularly influenced by Ralph and Levinson's *Survival in the Badlands* (2019): students interviewed saw schools as places which sought to change them even as they listened to their voices, and students reacted by carving out or appropriating spaces where they had control and agency. They felt the need for school experiences which were genuinely open and democratic, providing opportunities to feel autonomous and powerful as *part of* the school community rather than *apart from* it.

The online platform for tracking Terra's observations of Bathsheba, *Steplab*, had prescribed goals on 'Behaviour Management' which they were required to follow each week. As the focus moved beyond compliance and sanctions to cultivating positive learning behaviours, they considered how the listening ladder and sentence stems could enable students to express opinions without looking to the teacher to validate or rank points. As a White teacher, Bathsheba felt decentering herself from a discussion among ethnically diverse students about the presentations of race in short stories had wider implications: it relinquished White moral authority in a space where it traditionally holds court.

Over a term, Bathsheba's practice had a transformative impact on her Year 7 class. Black students who were initially reticent or refused to participate became discussion leaders and enthusiastic readers; she could routinely step back and listen to class discussions, using them to assess understanding and critical thinking skills.

Students' oracy skills improved, as did their collective responsibility for learning. With time they no longer needed sentence stems to participate confidently in intellectual discussions about social justice. Many students were able to speak critically about processes used

in lessons, like the order of steps in the listing ladder and how and why these worked. They praised the speaking and listening behaviours of their peers that helped them have meaningful discussions about race in literature.

## **Challenging colonial legacies: A networked approach in modern foreign languages**

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This initiative relates to the Association for Language Learning (ALL), a professional association for Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teachers. At the 2021 ALL conference, a colleague and I presented a paper which highlighted the failures of the current MFL curriculum provision to engage with the colonial legacies of the Target Languages countries and the favouring of Eurocentric cultural examples and literary texts (Panford & Irvine, 2021). Following this presentation, it became clear that there was an appetite for challenging colonial legacies across a range of educational settings. This led to us establishing the “Decolonise Secondary MFL Curriculum” Special Interest Group (SIG) for ALL members. The SIG facilitates dialogue between practitioners in schools, universities and educational publishing and assessment services to share pedagogical developments in decolonised curricula to improve the experiences and outcomes of students in the secondary classroom. Concerned with bringing attention to the issues of race and racism in Secondary MFL, the SIG's aims are underpinned by the conviction that urgent research and pedagogical interventions relating to these issues are needed in our field (Panford, 2021).

In response to this SIG, we received expressions of interest in collaborating on the theme of decolonised approaches to secondary MFL curricula through social media and email from classroom practitioners, academics of undergraduate, post-graduate and Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes, publishers and awarding bodies. Some teachers explained that they lacked the confidence to competently teach about diverse colonial legacies and incorporate authentic black narratives in their lessons (Mandler, 2014) and that they wanted support and training to be able to develop the pedagogical advancements they felt were needed in their schemes of work and classrooms.

A central aim of the SIG has been to provide space for members with shared values to connect, identify areas of concern, share good practice, and create opportunities for collaboration with a focus on practical application in the secondary MFL classroom. Guidelines for engaging in professional safe space conversations around the issues of race and racism were agreed in order to ensure the integrity of discussions. The discomfort around permission associated with discussing race in a critical and honest way was explored and the profound tensions and underpinning power dynamics at play were acknowledged. Collectively, we have discussed ways to:

- *Strengthen representation of the multi-ethnic diversity of target language countries in resources.*
- *Develop content relating to target language countries' colonial legacies.*
- *Amplify narratives from people of colour in our target language countries.*
- *Develop a questioning framework to support students' engagement/critical thinking skills.*
- *Develop a critical framework for interrogating MFL subject content/materials.*

Drawing on the wide-ranging expertise of colleagues across different educational sectors and settings has not only enriched discussions but also enabled a more holistic perspective.

While the impact of these meetings is hard to quantify, participants evidently value these discussions, and teachers have reported that they have meaningfully contributed to work in their own contexts. For example, one head of department explained: “I am getting so much from networking and the opportunity to collaborate on the issues that matter to me with like-minded colleagues with aligned values; not least the opportunity to feedback to my department.”

We have launched a website to accompany this SIG which allows teachers to access training and resources which “illuminate the hidden stories of marginalised people and cultures.” SIG members have authored and have been paid for decolonised content which can be freely accessed by teachers and learners.

While the precise shape of our future work is not fixed, the shared understanding between co-founders, SIG members and the ALL Management Board is that in order to be able to contribute meaningfully to raising awareness of the complexities of colonialism and discourses around race and racism in our subject, the approach will necessarily be long-term and ongoing.

## DISCUSSION

In this section we collectively reflect on our experiences to draw out links between teachers' professional learning and engagement in antiracist/decolonising initiatives. Across these vignettes—which cover diverse educational institutions, subjects and contexts—a recurrent “refrain” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) which appears repeatedly in different forms, is that of *collaboration*. Decolonising/antiracist work necessarily involves collaboration: between teachers, students and other school-level actors; within and across departments and subject communities; between schools, universities and other institutions; with local councils and community organisations. These collaborations routinely involve transgressing traditional boundaries and hierarchies within and between institutions (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). This is achieved through finding, opening up or making spaces for collaborative action and learning (Gaventa, 2006). The following sections highlight four aspects of these arrangements.

### Different starting points

The vignettes show educators approaching antiracist work from different starting points, with varying knowledge and understandings of race and racial disparities in education, informed by personal and professional experiences. In terms of motivations, many of the White authors referred to recent events or experiences as an impetus for their work (e.g., the Runnymede Report, toppling of Colston Statue, etc.), whereas Black authors were well acquainted with the presumption of White superiority and the censoring of discussions about race. Black British teachers' personal experiences with institutional racism in schools can inform their own relatively advanced racial literacy (Thomas, 2022) and their capacity to decipher the racial grammar that structures racialised hierarchies (Guinier, 2004). The enhanced racial literacy and awareness of Black teachers has been documented through school-based research internationally, including in the U.S. and South Africa (Allen, 2019; Mahabeer, 2020). Developing racial literacy is important for reparative work (Sriprakash et al., 2022), including the interrogation of racist and colonial representations in the curriculum, broadening the curriculum to include more accurate and balanced histories, and working with students to understand the influence of damaging stereotypes on their perceptions of self.



It is neither surprising nor coincidental that White teachers can enter the workforce with limited understandings of structural biases and racial disparities in our education system: indeed, schooling in this country has played an important role in the construction and preservation of “white ignorance” on such issues (Bain, 2018). Jo reflects that ‘colour blindness’ was the status quo in her all-White department, and Amy notes that race was a ‘taboo’ subject in her school. Similarly, Lisa describes teachers feeling a ‘discomfort’ and a need for ‘permission’ to speak openly about race as a precursor to redressing silences in the MFL curriculum. Troyna (1993) attributes this discomfort to a ‘benign neglect’ of political realities in favour of proxy concepts of race, such as culture, as reflected in ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’. In the context of teacher education in Canada, Radebe and Opini (2021) find that a recent cohort of predominantly White trainees still ascribe simplistic, pejorative stereotypes to Africa and Africans, suggesting that they will be unable to challenge the same stereotypes in their students’ opinions and their school curricula. Until decolonised curricula are embedded in both schools and teacher education institutions across the UK, it’s unlikely that British teachers will do better than their Canadian counterparts. In the meantime, the vignettes show that collaborative initiatives are a means of mobilising Black educators’ knowledge and experiences to inform practice more widely.

## Learning from student voice

Recent years have seen students around the world leading global movements for social and environmental justice, from Rhodes Must Fall, to School Strike for Climate, and “Why is my curriculum white?” (Abou El Magd, 2016). Similar pressures are evidenced in the accounts above, such as the students’ open letter to school leaders reported in Lydia’s vignette. While considerable progress has been made in recent decades, schools in England still lag behind international commitments made in Article 12 and 13 of the Assembly’s (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child, with students typically granted limited scope for meaningful participation in school-level processes (Harber, 2010).

Nevertheless, the antiracist and decolonial initiatives described above routinely involve students in processes of consultation, evaluation and decision-making. Aside from the international legal commitments referred to above, there are multiple instrumental reasons for engaging student voice on issues of race. As Gillborn’s (1995) research in schools demonstrates, students are often capable of recognising both overt racism and the racist implications of seemingly benign policies such as restrictions on hair styles; they can perceive racist assumptions in the way teachers single-out students from minority ethnic backgrounds, and recognise areas of uncertainty in schools’ adoption of antiracist practices. Student voice can also raise the profile of antiracist initiatives, making it difficult for individual departments and staff members to deny relevance (*ibid.*). In short, student voice is instrumental for implementing and evaluating antiracist policies, as students can see what teachers do not.

In Jo’s school, formal structures gave Black students a voice, inspiring and informing fundamental changes to the curricula: teachers’ professional learning from their students has resulted in a critical, multi-narrative approach to subject English. In Terra and Bathsheba’s work on the Year 7 English curriculum, students were positioned as collaborators who evaluated the school’s commitment to antiracism by feeding back on curriculum changes across the school. The decision to embed a piloted scheme of work was directly informed by student voice, and the scheme of work itself was subsequently developed to strengthen student agency in discussions. The vignettes demonstrate multiple ways in which student voice activities can inform teacher professional learning in the context of antiracist/decolonial initiatives.



## Flattening hierarchies

In accounts of successful antiracist curriculum work in the U.S., school teachers are key drivers of change (Bajaj, 2022; Givens, 2021). Although Givens' account is historical and Bajaj is drawing on the experiences of contemporary teachers, both describe a tension between prescriptive, deprofessionalising policy trends and the transformative impact of autonomy on both teacher motivation and the quality of curricula produced. Givens (2021) specifies that 'black teachers in particular have been systematically alienated, often being positioned as unintellectual and nonpedagogical knowers' (240). He describes how a network of Black educators led by Carter G Woodson the early 20th Century sought to counter this oppression and mobilise knowledge "outside of teacher training pathways" (164). As Givens explains, "The infusing of black life and culture into schools cannot be attributed to a top-down approach ... Black teachers actively worked to model the educational vision forged through their collaboration with Woodson on a local level" (165).

Formal structures for supporting teachers' professional learning in British schools are often designed to ensure compliance with the agendas of hierarchical authorities, such as the prescriptive *Steplab* mentoring programme described in Terra and Bathsheba's vignette. Since addressing structural inequalities along racial lines has never been an explicit objective of nationally-endorsed professional development activities in this country, educators seeking progress in these areas tend to work outside (and sometimes against) institutional hierarchies. This is demonstrated in the activities of middle leaders Jo and Kate, who invited teachers to challenge their curriculum and collaborate on its development as equals. Similarly, Subject Lead Terra used her mentoring role to work in partnership with first year teacher Bathsheba, and both sought to make students the leaders of their own classroom discussions. As Lisa explains, "drawing on the wide-ranging expertise of colleagues across different educational sectors and settings has not only enriched discussions but also enabled a more holistic perspective." In line with these examples, the evidence considered above suggests that progress on antiracist agendas requires mobilising capacities which are widely distributed across different stakeholder groups, through equitable partnerships which are minimally distorted by power relations (Mitchell et al., 2020). There is a tension, however, between celebrating greater teacher autonomy and allowing those in higher positions of authority to relinquish their responsibility for addressing racial illiteracy and biases in the national curriculum and teacher education.

## Finding, opening up and making spaces

Recent work highlights the role of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) in improving the quality of education, by addressing the gap between educational research and practice in and across schools (Brown, 2020). In order for all teachers and students to benefit from innovations, it is argued, senior leaders must embark on a complex process of 'brokerage', either disseminating a complete product or facilitating the research-informed, co-creation of improved practice (ibid.). While evidence from the vignettes aligns with some of this analysis, it is important to note that the initiatives described are not driven by those with positional leadership in school or dependent on formal PLNs. This article details the research-informed, co-creation of improved practice across *informal* learning networks, led by the teachers themselves.

The agential and collegial professional learning described in the vignettes is significant in the context of recent and markedly prescriptive changes to education policy (Hallahan, 2022). For example, the Early Career Framework (ECF) is a new two-year programme in which mentors like Terra are directed to use 'instructional coaching' to model and monitor a teacher-centred pedagogy. By using the weekly mentoring meetings as a space to discuss student agency, they were able to subvert the asymmetry prescribed by the ECF while achieving its wider aim of teaching students "positive learning behaviours".

Other accounts took a similar approach to working with the National Curriculum and exam boards, respecting guidelines but finding spaces for decolonising work where prescription gave way to autonomy, as in the choice of texts in English or perspectives in History. As Jo notes in her vignette, the recent Ofsted focus on curriculum intent, implementation and impact has created space for subject teams to research their units of work and apply a critical consciousness to their development. Similarly, Lisa founded her SiG with the explicit aim of providing "space for members ... to connect, identify areas of concern, share good practice, and create opportunities for collaboration with a focus on practical application in the secondary MFL classroom." Finding or making spaces for professional learning is necessary for decolonising work.

## CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that progress on decolonial/antiracist agendas requires finding, opening up or intentionally creating spaces for collaborative action and learning, with the Bristol Decolonising Network itself being one such example. Looking across the initiatives described in this article, we highlight the importance of:

- collaborative spaces within and across schools which mobilise and strengthen racial literacy in school discourse and across the curriculum
- using student voice to inform and evaluate antiracist teaching practice in schools
- enabling and empowering teachers to co-create antiracist curricula and trial more inclusive pedagogies
- developing and strengthening connections beyond the school (including with universities and other sectors and settings), to inform teacher professional development in areas of curricula and pedagogy beyond prescribed national policies

There are limitations to this work in terms of gaps in curriculum coverage, and the focus given to secondary over others phases of schooling. In spotlighting the voices of teachers, we neglect the perspectives of other relevant groups, including school leaders, parents, governors, and of course, students themselves. In particular, there is a need for research which focuses on students' experiences of antiracist/decolonising curricula and pedagogy, and explores the outcomes of such initiatives for different groups of learners in English schools. Despite these limitations, in documenting teachers' work and identifying promising avenues for progress, we are confident that this article provides valuable groundwork for future research and action in this space.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The work reflects professional ethics and norms within the teaching professional community, rather than a university-based ethical review board, but is informed by, and consistent with, the principles outlined in BERA's (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018) guidelines.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Details on project websites, One Bristol Curriculum (<https://www.onebristolcurriculum.org.uk/>); CARGO (<https://cargomovement.org/>)

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