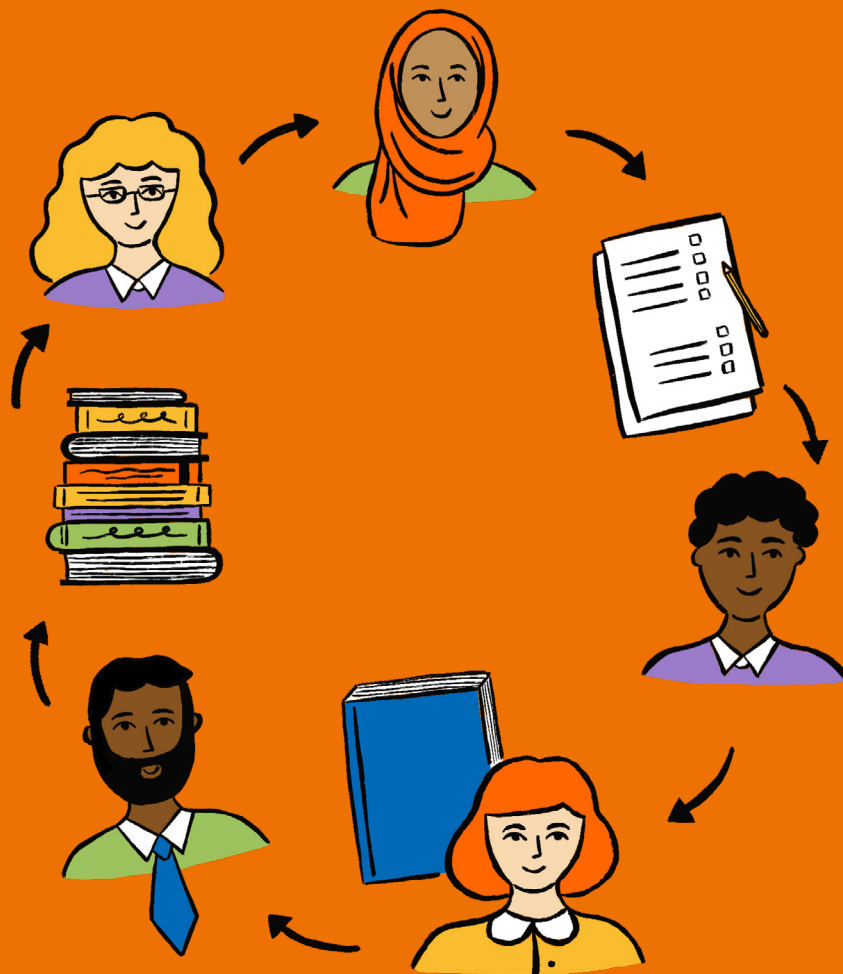


The effect of studying a text by an author of colour:

The Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot

Summary version



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Lit in *colour*

Commissioned by:



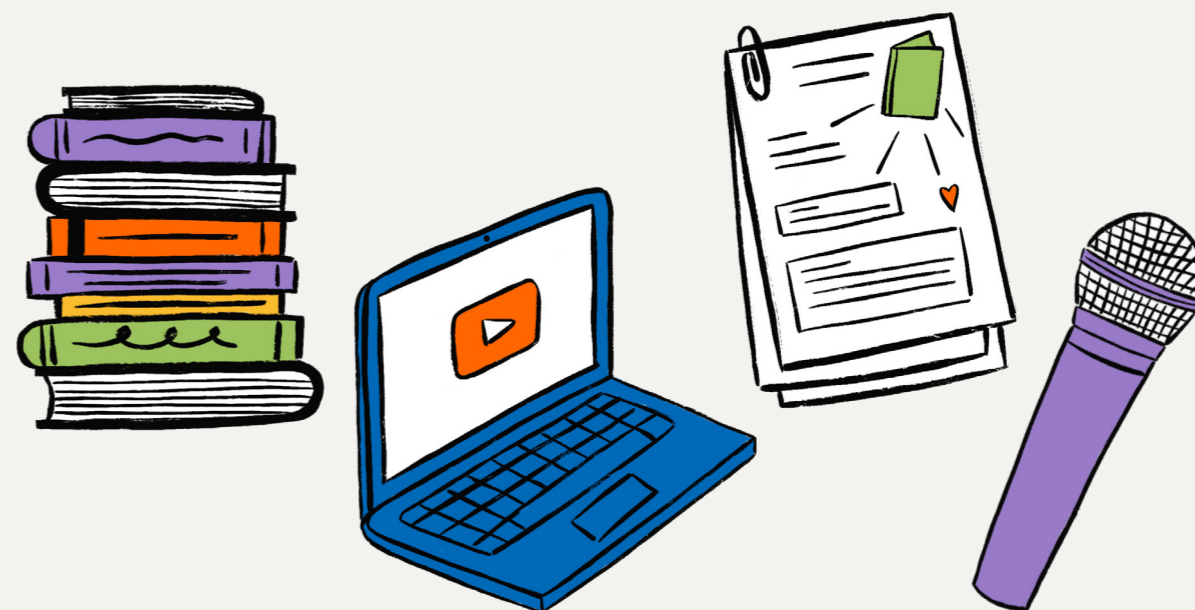


Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank all the participants in schools who gave their time to take part in this study. We would like to thank the Lit in Colour Project Board and Advisory Board for their guidance.

[Read the full report here](#)



Introduction

The Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot Programme

In 2019, exam board Pearson introduced a new set of diverse set texts to their Pearson Edexcel English Literature GCSE, followed by a further set of texts by authors of colour for A level Literature. These were due for first examination in 2021, but due to the pandemic the first examination actually fell in 2022. These new texts formed the foundation for the Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot. The design of the pilot was aimed at removing the barriers that prevent teachers from switching to more diverse set texts. Namely, the expense of buying new books, the lack of time to invest in developing new knowledge, resources and schemes of work, the lack of teacher knowledge of texts and contexts in relation to this literature, and the lack of confidence in discussing race in the classroom.

Diversifying the curriculum is important for all students. All students need to be prepared to live in the diverse multicultural society that is Britain today, and a diverse literary diet helps to nurture that.

The Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot programme represented an unprecedented chance to examine the effects of studying a text by an author of colour in the UK. It is important to have empirical data to support the principle of diversifying the curriculum, because this helps to drive change in policy, and to reassure those who want to change but are worried about the impact. Here we report results from quantitative and qualitative data collection from students and teachers involved in the Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot programme.

“
Broadening the scope of the literature available inevitably leads to a broadening of outlook and horizons, providing the inspiration that leads to aspiration.
”

Foreword

by **Malorie Blackman**

Stories. Surely there is no better way to make sense of this world, ourselves and others than via stories. The benefits of reading have been well documented, including but not limited to improving our mental health and wellbeing, allowing us to be able to grasp new ideas and concepts more readily, improving vocabulary, engendering a sense of empathy, fostering understanding of others and the list goes on.

The evolution of stories cannot be static. They, in all their forms, have to move, change and adapt with the times. There will always be room for the classics in the UK English Literature curricula but a space and place needs to be made for more inclusive and diverse contemporary stories across all educational boards. These stories, as told by a more diverse cohort of authors, have a relevance, relatability and appeal across all readerships as evidenced by the Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot research, 2024.

No child should ever feel that studying English at school is irrelevant because they never see themselves and their lives reflected in the literature they are tasked to read. Broadening the scope of the literature available inevitably leads to a broadening of outlook and horizons, providing the inspiration that leads to aspiration.

A National Literacy Trust annual survey (Sep 4, 2023) reported that children's reading enjoyment was

at its lowest level in almost two decades, with over half of 8-18 year-olds stating that they don't enjoy reading in their free time.

Over the many years that I have been an author, I have seen for myself how stories can flip the mental switch which leads to a love of not just reading but many other creative endeavours, with all the myriad benefits that may bring.

The last few years have seen a drastic decline in the uptake of English at A level - from 79,000 in 2016 to 54,000 in 2023. One way to stem this outgoing tide would be to improve the perceived relevance of the texts set in the English curriculum across all exam boards to increase engagement. This Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot research has shown the positive impact that this can and does have.

Having an English exam curriculum which has a more diverse base when it comes to the literature studied by our children is a matter of enrichment, engagement and sheer common sense and not one of special pleading. If we wish to tackle the thorny topic of children who seem to be growing more disaffected by reading for pleasure and in the classroom, then the promotion of books seen to be more relevant and relatable to their own lives and perceptions of society is a crucial first step.

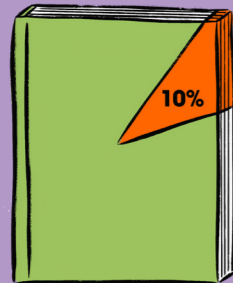
Malorie Blackman

Key Findings

[Read the full report here](#)

*indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 level (i.e. less than 5% likelihood of happening by chance)
**indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level (i.e. less than 1% likelihood of happening by chance)

Texts



10% of students taking Pearson Edexcel GCSE English Literature now study a text by an author of colour.



This is 100x more students than before the Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot Programme.

Empathy

Students raised increased empathy and understanding of others as key learning outcomes from studying the text in interviews.

Engagement

Teachers and students report higher levels of classroom engagement when studying Pioneers texts. Teachers also report that the texts enable greater cognitive engagement as seen in whole text understanding and analysis.



Relevance

Students were more likely to report that they found the stories and characters in the books that they read felt relevant to their lives and community after reading one of the Pioneers texts*.

Achievement

Contrary to concerns expressed by teachers in the original Lit in Colour report about changing their set texts, students can achieve a range of marks answering on a new text. Examiners' reports from 2022 and 2023 show that students studying the Pioneers texts achieved across the full range of marks, including at the very highest levels.

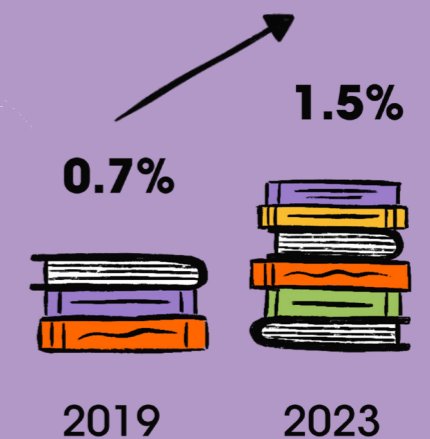


Student interest

Students were less likely to report that they were 'often bored' in school after studying one of the Pioneers texts*.

Authors of colour

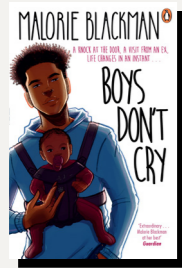
The overall percentage of students answering on a text by an author of colour for GCSE in England has more than doubled from 0.7% in 2019 to 1.5% in 2023. This change is solely due to the change in the numbers of students answering on a text by an author of colour on Pearson Edexcel examinations.



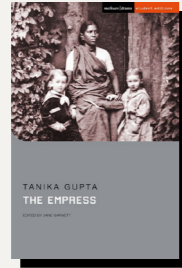
Lit in Colour Pioneers Texts

GCSE and A Level texts by authors of colour offered on the Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot

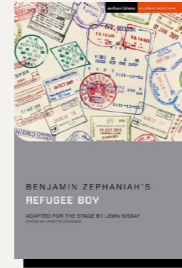
GCSE



Boys Don't Cry
Malorie Blackman



The Empress
Tanika Gupta



Refugee Boy
Lemn Sissay

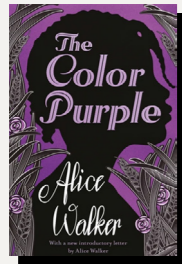


Coram Boy
Jamila Gavin

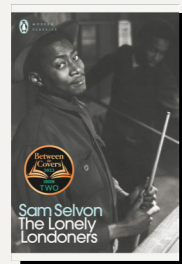


Anita & Me
Meera Syal

A-level



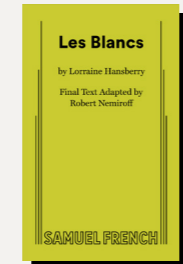
The Color Purple
Alice Walker



The Lonely Londoners
Sam Selvon



Beloved
Toni Morrison



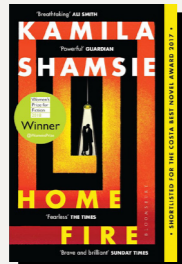
Les Blancs
Lorraine Hansberry



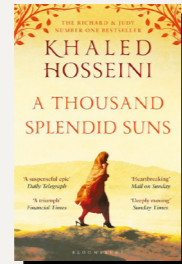
The Cutting Season
Attica Locke



Sweat
Lynn Nottage



Home Fire
Kamila Shamsie

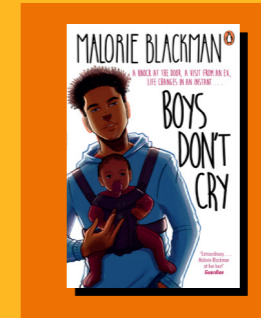


A Thousand Splendid Suns
Khaled Hosseini

Case Study

Boys Don't Cry at UTC Derby

For staff at UTC Derby, *Boys Don't Cry* offers a perfect way to engage students in the importance of English. The school is a 14-18 University Technical College specialising in engineering and health sciences. But English is crucial for the students because:



One White student commented that he hadn't really thought about the unfairness of certain groups not being represented in the curriculum before, but on studying *Boys Don't Cry* and being prompted to think about it, he could see how necessary it was for diversity to be part of the curriculum.

'They've got to understand the world around them and the people they work with and be empathetic with the people they work with.'

– Lee Kirkwood, Principal UTC Derby

Other students enthused about how they see the book as being relevant to their lives now, and how studying it has made them start or re-start reading outside the curriculum:

'I think that Boys Don't Cry has really impacted the books I read, because I used to stick to a very specific genre, but now that I've read a book like Boys Don't Cry, it's made me want to reach out into different type of books and stories and read them.'

– Jess, a year ten student

'I didn't actually read much at home, other than what I read at school and reading Boys Don't Cry has really influenced me to take books from the library and read them at home.'

– Mia, a year ten student

Malorie Blackman's *Boys Don't Cry* has been the mechanism for achieving that, and dispelling misconceptions that English is not relevant for the subjects and careers the school focuses on preparing students for. Prominent wall displays demonstrate the importance of the novel to the school, and the English department talk passionately about the 'lifechanging' teaching of the novel and the ways that the book has changed the way their students engage with English lessons. It's also been a major success for their attainment:

'Academically for us it's been phenomenal and groundbreaking in that we've gone from 50% pass rate grade 4 and above to 76% pass rate and the only thing we've changed is this novel.'

– Hayley Robathan, Curriculum Director for English

Case Study

Boys Don't Cry at Heathlands School for Deaf Children

Heathlands School for Deaf Children has a small cohort of students who undertake English Literature GCSE. British Sign Language has no written form, so children who communicate in it all learn to read and write English. But the languages are different, and for profoundly deaf children English counts

as a second language. This can mean that reading a text for literature study involves the difficult decryption of syntax and grammar just for comprehension, before they begin analysing it – but with *Boys Don't Cry* the students could just enjoy reading it and tackling it as a text. Ellie Monk, English teacher at Heathlands, was delighted in the change in attitude:

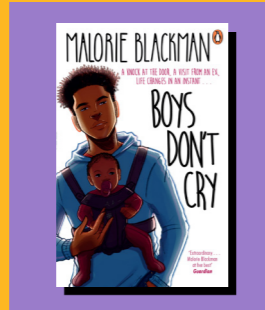
'It really changed the way my students view literature because they are usually like 'Oh, I really don't like reading - it's hard, those books are not relevant to me.'

The students confirmed this:

'Honestly, I have never really enjoyed reading books but this book has helped me in a lot of ways.'

– Tosif, a year eleven student

The use of a modern book with contemporary issues about race, queerness, toxic masculinity and teen parenthood was received with enthusiasm by students who describe the engaging class discussions they had around the book. Several students picked out the specific issues raised by teen fatherhood:



'I assumed that we all experience similar struggles but other people experience different struggles, i.e. teen fathers who experience more prejudice than teen mothers as there is a stereotype of them 'running away'.'

– Thalia, a year eleven student

Students talked about understanding the perspectives of others, but also seeing their own place in the world. Ellie talks about the significance of recognising diversity in the curriculum for these students in particular:

'It is really important to recognise and to represent diversity because it is the world we live in... and to learn about differences; culture, religion, race and whatever, and – to give the students the opportunity to learn about difference – I think that's really important. Because I am a deaf person, my students are deaf, we're a deaf school... We know it's important to recognise and learn about difference. It should be celebrated.'

– Ellie Monk

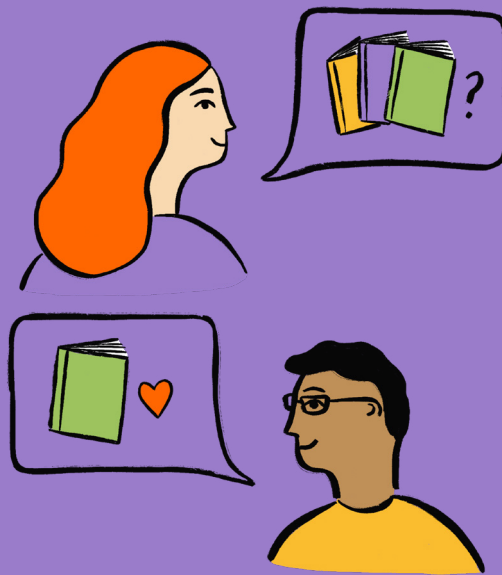
The choice has paid off: Ellie has enjoyed the text because of how different it feels from the other texts they study at GCSE, and the increased engagement from the students. The changes the school has seen through teaching *Boys Don't Cry* has inspired the possibility for that to be embedded throughout the English Literature curriculum.

Lessons for future action

For teachers

- Students can achieve a range of marks answering on a new text, including at the very highest levels.
 - There are advantages in terms of classroom and cognitive engagement in teaching a text which is perceived as dealing with modern issues, and as being relevant to the lives of students.
 - Reading as a whole has the potential to improve cultural competency.
 - The experience of teaching texts which are new to you and which require some background research can be a very positive one.
- Read the full report [here](#)**
- Teaching needs to plan for explicit engagement with the race aspects of the texts which have been chosen.





Illustrations by Taaryn Brench

Commissioned by:



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