Introduction and background

The article on which this summary is based was written by Lorna Smith who is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Bristol University’s School of Education. The author begins by arguing that if we wish pupils to engage in a diverse world which truly values and celebrates difference and equality, we should provide literature that reflects those aspirations. However, a research project currently being undertaken by researchers from 6 universities in Wales and South West England indicates that the literature experienced at Key Stage 3 fails to do this. This article explores the issue further by taking an in-depth look at the literary works which feature most prominently in the current Key Stage 3 English curriculum. The article will appear in the summer edition of Teaching English, a magazine published by the National Association of Teacher of English (NATE), NATE provides a forum for the development of modern approaches to teaching in schools. It reports to teachers on developments in policy, practice and research. It also provides free CPD through a series of regional Teachmeets.

Key points

Rationale for the research

- The National Curriculum requires that texts set for examination are drawn from ‘our rich and varied literary heritage’ (DfE, 2014: 3). While intended to provide learners with ‘cultural capital’ and what ED Hirsch terms ‘powerful knowledge’, this arguably delimits and curtails their reading experience. A glance at the prose and drama texts on offer in a popular GCSE specification (AQA, 2014) suggests that it consists of 15 male authors (including Shakespeare) to just 5 female, and only 2 non-white authors. Furthermore, alongside the requirement to study Shakespeare and a 19th century novel, the most popular of the five so-called ‘modern’ GCSE texts (AQA, 2018) are An Inspector Calls (published in 1945), Lord of the Flies (published in 1954) and Animal Farm (published in 1945) meaning that even the ‘modern’ is represented by 70-year old texts written by now-dead white men.
- However, the choice of literature taught in Key Stage 3 is still very much the domain of English departments and individual teachers. In theory, the early secondary years provide an opportunity to teach a range of texts that offer a diverse literature diet and thus – as the National Curriculum requires - ‘develop [pupils’] love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment’ (DfE, 2014: 3).
- Commonly taught texts across the 170+ schools in the research display 3 key features. Firstly, there is a marked lack of gender diversity: female authors and female protagonists are rare. Secondly, the vast majority of texts taught are extremely dated – even discounting Shakespeare, the mean publication date of those that feature in the Top Ten lists is 1846: contemporary authors hardly feature. Thirdly, most authors are white: non-white authors are rare.
- The latest PISA report suggests that although reading scores in England have recently increased (and remain on a par with the OECD average in Wales), learners have negative attitudes to reading: ‘more than half the respondents in England agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I only read if I have to”’ (Videbaek, 2020). These are depressing findings – but perhaps the stale, male and pale curriculum offer contributes to learners’ antipathy to reading.
- Zhao et al. (2005) found evidence that a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning was most beneficial to outcomes. This finding is, however, not found in other reviews, which discovered no evidence to differentiate between asynchronous or synchronous instruction.

Research methodology

- The research team developed a detailed online survey which was promoted to the schools working in partnership with the researchers’ ITE programmes and through the UKLA website. Over 170 responses were returned, predominantly from the South West region and Wales, but including schools from around the rest of England and some from abroad.
- The survey data provided a sense of the range and nature of the KS3 literature experience. It enabled the researchers to identify the top ten texts studied by genre and year group and to examine them in terms of their diversity. The next phase of the research will report on in-depth interviews which were undertaken with a number of survey respondents.

Key findings: Prose

- With the exceptions of ‘A Christmas Carol’ and ‘Animal Farm’, the most common Year 7 texts were written in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of this century. The most recent is ‘A Monster Calls’, published in 2011. Apart from the Harry Potter series, and the important contribution of Siobhan Dowd to ‘A Monster Calls’, all the top ten texts are written by male authors. Whilst significant female characters may appear in some of the top ten, the protagonists are all male. ‘Boy’, describing episodes from
Dahl’s childhood, including his time at a boys’ boarding school, is one of the few non-fiction texts noted in the survey. It includes the infamous Mrs Pratchett – hardly a model of female empowerment.

- Looking at Year 8 prose, ‘The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas’ is the most commonly read text. All of the texts in this list are over 10 years old. Four were first published over 70 years ago, with ‘Frankenstein’ dating back over 200 years. ‘The Hunger Games’ (2008) is the most recent. Whereas five of the texts in this list are also taught in Year 7, the introduction of texts such as ‘Of Mice and Men’, ‘Frankenstein’ and ‘1984’ bring a more mature feel to this list. It is pleasing to see a rise in the number of female authors, albeit only three of the eleven (Collins, Shelley, Blackman), and the introduction of female protagonists in two of the texts (‘The Hunger Games’ and ‘Noughts and Crosses’). ‘Noughts and Crosses’ is the only text by an author of colour to feature across the Year 8 and Year 9 lists: Malorie Blackman is the sole representative - one out of 20.

- The Year 9 prose list shows that the texts ‘age’ with the age of the year group. Four texts appear in the Year 9 top ten but not in the lists for Years 7 and 8: ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, ‘Lord of the Flies’, ‘The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time’ and ‘The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’. These are all texts that have connections with the Literature GCSE, and this is likely to be the reason for their appearance at this stage. This list contains just two twenty-first century texts; the remainder are over 60 years old, with three written in the nineteenth century. Three are written by women (Lee, Shelley, Collins), and there are two female protagonists (‘The Hunger Games’, ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’).

- ‘Of Mice and Men’ is by far the most frequently read prose text, not only in Year 9 but in the top 20. This is probably related to its removal from GCSE Literature in England, but its unflattering portrayals of Curley’s wife (nameless, a victim of her husband’s control) and of Crooks as a black man denigrated by his co-workers need – at least – careful handling in the classroom in terms of diversity.

**Key findings: Poetry**

- Five of the top 12 poems were written between 1794-1851, perhaps as a nod to the National Curriculum requirement in England to focus on the Romantics. Only two were written within the past century; even the most recent, ’Blackberry Picking‘ and ‘First Day at School’, were written in the 1960s. All the poets studied are male and all the protagonists are male – even the animals! - with the exception of individual women in ‘The Canterbury Tales' and ‘The Lady of Shalott’.

- Year 8 Poetry: The most recent poem is ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’. It is therefore possible that many learners in Year 8 do not experience any poetry written within the past 100 years. As with the Year 7 list, the poems remain almost exclusively male and the main characters are also male. ‘Who’s for the Game?’ (Jessie Pope) is perhaps taught alongside ‘Dulce’ in the four cases recorded, which at least ensures a female poet is studied.

- Year 9 Poetry: ‘Dulce’ is, again, the most popular poem in the Year 9 curriculum. Five schools noted that they study anthologies of War Poetry (it is not known whether a GCSE anthology or an anthology developed by the school); a further 3 noted explicitly that they study the AQA Power and Conflict poems. There were several other poems with 2 counts not listed in the table which further suggests that War Poetry schemes of work are popular: these include ‘Mametz Wood’ (Sheers) and ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’ (Tennyson).

- The inclusion of Armitage’s ‘Remains’ means that, in some schools at least, learners are introduced to contemporary texts. There are just two women poets who feature: Pope (again) and Maya Angelou. ‘And Still I Rise’ is perhaps the first opportunity the learners in those 3 schools have had to study a message of female black empowerment. Maya Angelou and John Agard are the only poets of colour whose work features in the 19 poems which are commonly studied.

**Key findings: Drama**

- Shakespeare is synonymous with drama experienced in Year 7 (7 of the 10 texts studied). The only other originally dramatic text is Under Milk Wood, with the other two texts being modern adaptations of novels (one historic, one contemporary). There are no texts by female dramatists. Although Shakespeare, of course, provides plenty of feisty female protagonists (Helena and Hermia, Miranda, Lady Macbeth, Juliet) they are mainly seen in relation to male subjugation.

- Thomas’ women - Rosie Probert, Myfanwy Price, Mrs Pugh and co - might offer different perspectives, but even these are from the pen of a 1950s male. Face by Benjamin Zephaniah is the only drama by an author of colour in the top ten lists for the whole of key stage three.

- Seven of the 10 texts studied in Year 8 are by Shakespeare. There are some more interesting examples of female roles (Viola, Katharina), but there are still no female dramatists represented.

- In the year 9 drama curriculum five texts are by Shakespeare, although he is knocked off the top spot by An Inspector Calls. The presence of this and other GCSE texts suggests that learners begin exam study during this year. It is worth pointing out that An Inspector Calls, written 75 years ago, is many times more popular than DNA (written in 2008), although - arguably - both these plays challenge gender stereotypes, with roughly an equal number of leading female and male parts, and women presented as independent and assertive.

- Only one out of 22 drama texts listed is by an author of colour.

**Conclusion**

- The researchers are not suggesting that schools throw away the content of their stock cupboard and rewrite their schemes of work. However, it is entirely possible that learners can go right through Key Stage 3 exclusively studying decades-old texts written by white men, about male characters, which raises some key questions.

- What impact does this under-representation of women have on both boys and girls in KS3? What influence does it have on boys' expectations of girls and women, and what message is given to girls about their status and importance in the world? What impact does this under-representation of non-white people have on both white and non-white students? And what other messages may be inadvertently implied about any aspect of inclusion - race, ethnicity, religion, (dis)ability, sexuality - through our literature choices?

- The researchers hope that this article might stimulate discussion within English departments and, possibly, the refreshing of tired Key Stage 3 stock cupboards. They believe that a love of reading can be enhanced through providing a balance of diverse reading experiences that inspire teachers and learners alike.