



Lit in colour

Five-year progress report:

**Why every student should have
the opportunity to study
a book by an author of colour**

Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by Professor Velda Elliott and Dr Lesley Nelson Addy with input from Lit in Colour’s Project Board consisting of members from Penguin and Runnymede Trust. We are grateful to our exam board partners for sharing exam entry data, Public First and Pearson for the inclusion of our polling activity data, and the Swan School.

Lit in Colour partners and stakeholders:



Illustrations by Taaryn Branch

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Foreword by Bernardine Evaristo

A more expansive curriculum for a multicultural world

There have been significant societal shifts since 2021 when I wrote the foreword for the first Lit in Colour report, which revealed shocking statistics on the paucity of literature by people of colour on the school curriculum. This new report reveals that while there has been some improvement, in spite of the impressive efforts of the Lit in Colour campaign, the statistics are still not good. The report states, “at this current rate of growth, only 10% of GCSE students will answer one question on a text by an author of colour by 2046”.

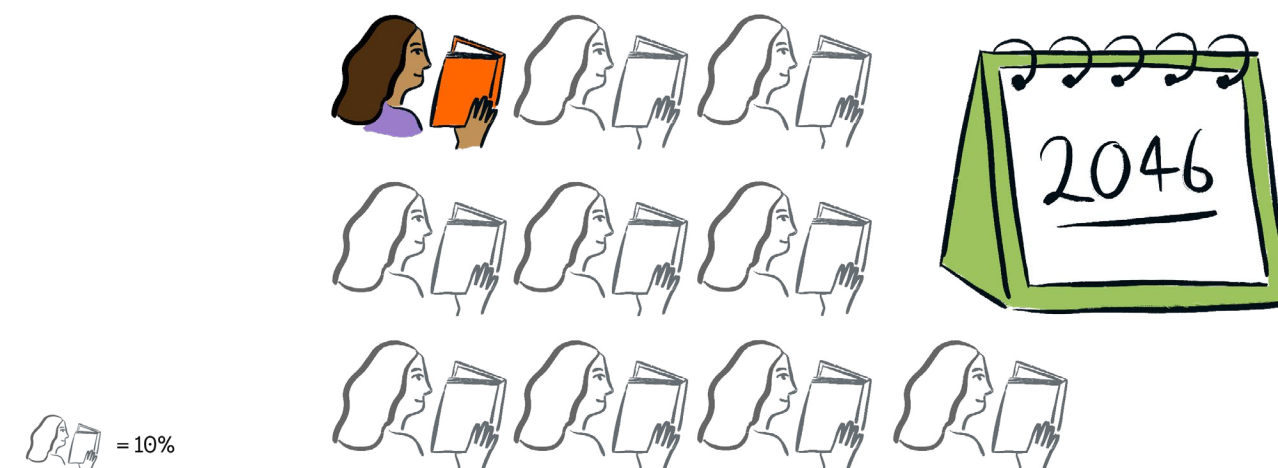
In 2020, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK, triggered by the murder of George Floyd in the US, led to a reckoning around the insidious nature of the kind of institutional racism that tends to be unacknowledged by institutions, and therefore not perceived as a problem, which in turn makes it hard to successfully counteract through the implementation of effective reforms. However, suddenly, there was a noticeable willingness from many institutions to explore some of the barriers people of colour have had to face, including in the education sector. It was a time of hope, positive activism and progressive conversations that precipitated commitments to opening hitherto closed doors.

Fast forward to 2025 and it seems as if those doors are closing again, and I worry that young people today are once again growing up in a society where attempts to

become more egalitarian are under threat, with the tide turning against inclusion. The term ‘diversity’ itself is now considered a dangerous concept in some quarters, with all attempts at becoming a more progressive society dismissed as ‘woke’. We risk returning to a culture where our hard-won rights could be revoked, from the Suffragette battles of over a hundred years ago to all the subsequent anti-discrimination legislation that has helped build a fairer and more equal society.

In this climate, the Lit in Colour campaign is even more essential to ensuring that books by authors of colour are on the curriculum. Further, I think we need to make sure that the chosen literature represents both African and Asian heritage authors, and that they feature protagonists of colour. The aim is for schoolchildren to benefit from a curriculum that draws on racial and cultural specificities. A book by an author of colour featuring only white characters is not the same as one focussed on people of colour, when the aim is to enhance children’s encounters with diverse voices. When the young see people of colour reflected in the texts they are taught, it expands their understanding of literature and knowledge base about different cultures; it offers an increased appreciation of a myriad of perspectives and experiences; and it fosters understanding and empathy of other people’s lives.

It goes without saying that rather than drawing up lists as a tick-boxing exercise, the literature needs to be



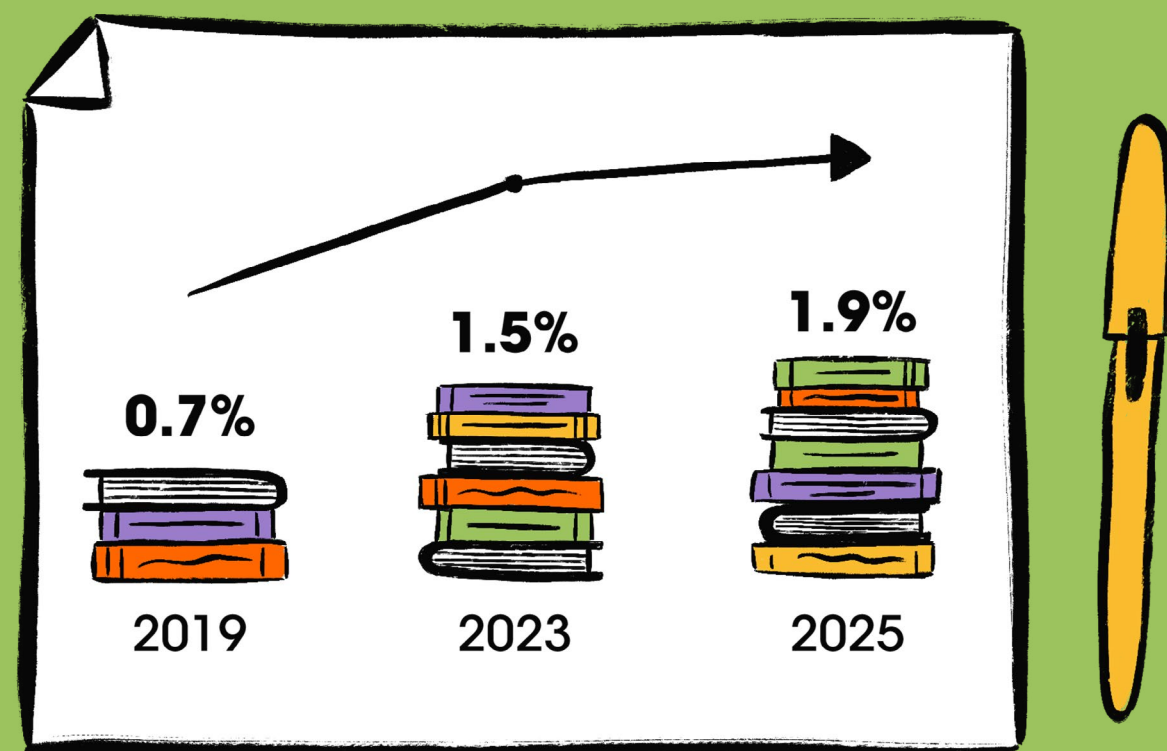
excellent enough to withstand critical scrutiny. Excellent literature, however we variously define it, must be the priority.

I also need to emphasise, because it always needs to be stated, that schoolchildren should continue to study the canonical texts, whether it’s Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens or Woolf. The argument for a more diverse reading list is not an argument against the tradition, a common assumption and criticism from naysayers, but rather, it is an argument for both: books that reflect our multi-racial society as well as those that are rooted in its literary history.

Lit in Colour’s reports, based on empirical research and findings, are leading the campaign to ensure books by authors of colour are on the curriculum, which benefits all children. I am in agreement with the recommendations outlined in this report, including the urgent need to develop essential resources for teaching texts by authors of colour. A lack of these materials means there is a tendency to teach the same well-resourced books while other great titles are overlooked.

Our children’s education is precious and it behoves us all to support a more expansive literature curriculum that will help guide them to becoming fully-rounded adults able to navigate our multicultural world. This is why I am proud to continue supporting this campaign.

**Only 10% of GCSE
students will answer
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In our first five years, the proportion of GCSE students studying books by authors of colour has risen from 0.7% to 1.9%.

Introduction

In the summer of 2025, more than 600,000 students sat down and turned the page to begin their GCSE English Literature exams. More than one in three of them identified as Black, Asian or minority ethnic. Fewer than one in 50 had studied a book by an author of colour.

A quarter of a century earlier the landmark Macpherson Report – prompted by the murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence – argued that the National Curriculum had failed to meet the needs of a “diverse multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society”.

This past year the government-commissioned Curriculum and Assessment Review appeared to reach a similar conclusion, stating that: “the national curriculum, and the resources that support it, should reflect our modern society and diverse communities.” It put special emphasis on English: “the curriculum must also allow space for teachers to exercise autonomy in selecting from a broader range of texts and authors, so that students are able to see themselves in the curriculum, as well as be exposed to a wide range of perspectives to broaden their horizons.”

Since 2020, the Lit in Colour campaign has been working towards this goal, primarily by supporting schools to make the English Literature curriculum more inclusive of authors of colour. In our first five years, the proportion of GCSE students studying books by authors of colour has risen from 0.7% to 1.9%.

We are encouraged by these signs of progress, but discouraged by their pace. At this rate another two decades will pass before one student in ten studies an author of colour, and almost a century before that number approaches the current proportion of students who identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic.

We believe the pace of change must be much faster, and the ambition much greater. It is unsustainable for publishers alone to deliver this: we need more organisations including the government to partner with us and fund this work. Our central recommendation is that every student in England should have the opportunity to study a book by an author of colour.

This is because our research has shown that all students benefit from studying a more diverse range of books.





Books and reading feel relevant, their classroom engagement and empathy increases and they achieve the same or higher attainment levels.

The benefits go well beyond their formal education. Curriculum content plays a crucial role in young peoples' reading enjoyment, and reading for pleasure has a demonstrably positive effect on educational outcomes, social development and wellbeing.

In polling by Public First for Lit in Colour, 33% of young people say the books they study in school put them off reading and 68% of parents and young people say they want an English Literature curriculum that reflects the diversity of modern-day Britain.

Led by Penguin Random House and principal partner the Runnymede Trust, Lit in Colour is a partnership between educational and cultural organisations and England's

exam boards (Pearson, Cambridge OCR, Eduqas and AQA). Our original research identified four barriers that inhibit schools from teaching authors of colour – time, money, teacher confidence and subject knowledge – and we have designed a range of practical interventions to overcome them.

In this report, we pull together and summarise our first five years in the hope that this might inspire further and faster progress. We make three key recommendations for change, we highlight the lessons we've learned so far, and we suggest practical next steps for organisations and individuals who want to join the movement.

We are as convinced as ever that greater diversity in what's taught and read will enhance young people's reading experiences and sense of belonging. We thank every individual and organisation who is pursuing this goal and invite others who share our vision to come on board.

What must change:

Lit in Colour's key recommendations

Lit in Colour builds on work started in the 1960s to address the historic and systematic under-representation of authors and characters of colour in the teaching and learning of English. We are still in the foothills of that effort.

While the Curriculum and Assessment Review emphasises the importance of diversifying the English curriculum, the roadmap for practical implementation is unclear. Retaining the current GCSE English Literature requirements alongside an explicit intention not to increase the amount of content (i.e. number of texts students study) is a barrier to the desired increased diversity. And while full-length texts by authors of colour can be studied in the modern texts section, this report shows the overwhelming majority of teachers do not select those texts. With the scale of changes proposed for GCSE English Language, we see a risk that including diverse voices is deprioritised and changes to poetry anthologies are treated as sufficient.

Building on a growing research base and five years of support for schools, Lit in Colour urges a new, more determined and better-resourced focus and commitment to ensure the benefits of an inclusive and representative English curriculum are felt by all students in the UK. We believe this can make an important contribution to a more inclusive and harmonious society for all.

We make three key recommendations, which we address to government, exam boards, publishers, schools, teachers, parents and other interested organisations. Together these recommendations will help achieve our goal: that every GCSE student in England should have the opportunity to study a book by an author of colour.

Recommendation 1:

We should introduce all young people to books by authors of colour and featuring protagonists of colour in classrooms, libraries and homes. This should become a core element of efforts to promote reading for pleasure.

Recommendation 2:

The curriculum should give every student the opportunity to study full-length texts by authors of colour at GCSE and A level. They should be embedded in the curriculum at earlier Key Stages.

Recommendation 3:

Significant, sustained investment is required to develop equitable resources for teaching texts by authors of colour and to support schools to teach new texts. Teachers also require support to engage with themes of race, racism and empire where they appear in 19th century novels.



What we've learned:

Lessons from Lit in Colour's first five years

Recommendation 1:

We should introduce all young people to books by authors of colour and featuring protagonists of colour in classrooms, libraries and homes. This should become a core element of efforts to promote reading for pleasure.

Young people want – and deserve – a more diverse English curriculum

This report coincides with the start of the UK's National Year of Reading. It is one attempt to address the decades-long decline in reading for pleasure, recognising its positive contribution to a wide range of life outcomes. Since launch, Lit in Colour has advocated that ensuring all young people have the opportunity to read books featuring characters that reflect their life experiences is crucial to support reading for pleasure.

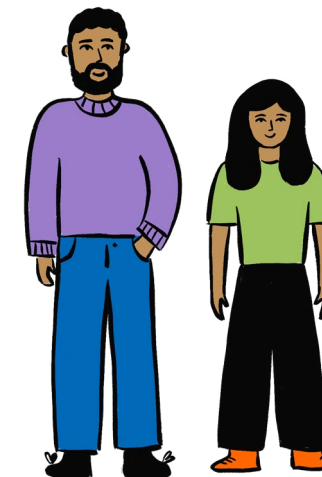
It can be challenging for young people to find representative books. Research by the National Literacy Trust found that two in five (38.9%) young people aged eight to 18 find it difficult to find books with characters or people like them, increasing to one in two (53.1%) among young people aged eight to 11 (Picton & Clark, 2022). This research aligns with Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's (CLPE) annual *Reflecting Realities* reports

published over the last eight years, which demonstrate the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of characters of colour in children's books. Parents and young people require support to find diverse texts, and resources originally designed for teachers and librarians such as the (incomplete) Lit in Colour book lists, the CLPE's various reports, or *Beyond the Secret Garden* (Chetty & Sands-O'Connor, 2024) can support this.

In 2025 Lit in Colour collaborated with Pearson to commission research from Public First via nationally representative polls of students and parents to identify students' reading habits, experiences and perceptions of school, and engagement and opinion of the English curriculum.

Our polling found that curriculum content has a powerful impact on whether students enjoy reading more generally. A third of students responding reported that the books they study in school put them off

Large majorities of both parents (68%) and young people (68%) agreed that the curriculum should reflect the diversity of modern-day Britain



68%

68%

reading. Therefore, the English Literature curriculum has a direct influence on students' reading enjoyment within and outside the classroom. Our research shows that diversifying what's taught can help English Literature feel more relevant and engaging to students, is crucial to supporting reading habits, and could enhance the uptake of A level and degree level English.

Students' calls for a more diverse range of books are echoed by parents. Parent respondents believed that studying diverse literature helped students to feel like they belonged in society (66% agreed), and that doing so helped to prepare students for the real world (70%). Large majorities of both parents (68%) and young people (68%) agreed that the curriculum should reflect the diversity of modern-day Britain. Black students felt this even more strongly (84% agreed).

Students from a minoritised ethnic background were more likely to believe that the curriculum contained too many books by White authors (58%) compared to White students (37%).

When asked to write what they would change about the English curriculum in open text comments, 23% of students asked for increased diversity (whether that meant racial, gender, sexuality, world literature or SEND

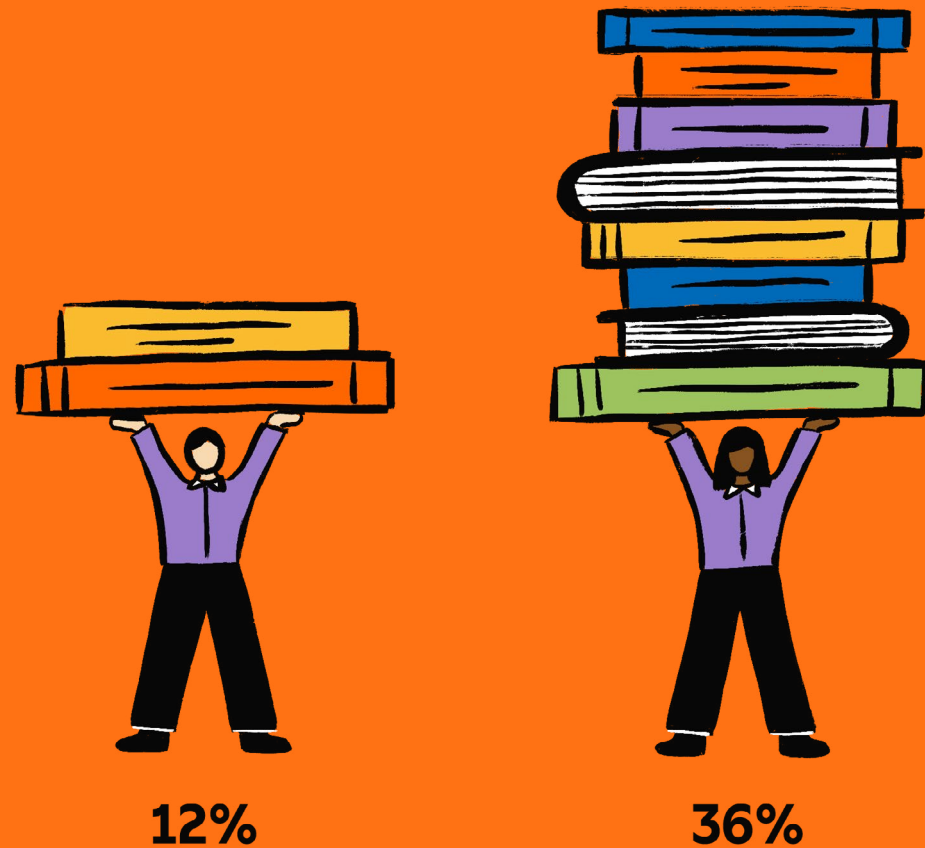
representation) and 24% asked for the inclusion of more modern texts in the curriculum.¹ One young person asked for 'books that I would actually read outside of school'. Three students also commented directly that they were reading the same texts their parents had, as a motivation for change, with *Of Mice and Men* and *Romeo and Juliet* being singled out for comment.

More than half of all students (56%) asked agreed that teachers should teach about the voices, characters and perspectives which are missing from classic texts, rising to 69% agreement when just considering students from a minoritised ethnic background. They also agreed that there should be a core of classic texts taught to ensure that students engaged with books which have shaped culture and language over generations (66% agreed and rising to 74% among asking students from a minoritised ethnic background). In general, students (46% agreed) and parents (65% agreed) alike want a balanced curriculum that incorporates classics and modern-day works, which aligns with the aims of the Lit in Colour campaign.

Some students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds spoke about their experiences in class. For example, they described how their peers look at them when racial slurs appear in texts. This is consistent with research around racist epithets in literature teaching (e.g. Mohamud, 2020; Elliott, 2025b) and evidence showing religiously and racially minoritised young people can self-censor on these issues in classrooms to avoid being misrepresented, and that supportive environments for discussion may not be offered (Kitching, Gholami, Kandemir & Rahman, 2025).



¹ Percentages of students who responded to the open text question (n. 719). These two groups are not mutually exclusive – where answers suggested both, they were coded twice.



In 2025 there are eight texts (36% of texts) by authors of colour on exam board set text lists, mostly of Black and South Asian heritage. This is a change from 12% in 2019.

Recommendation 2:

The curriculum should give every student the opportunity to study full-length texts by authors of colour at GCSE and A level. They should be embedded in the curriculum at earlier Key Stages.

All students can benefit from studying texts by authors of colour

Lit in Colour has combined practical support for schools with research to evaluate its impact. One example is the Lit in Colour Pioneers Programme, a partnership between Penguin Random House and Pearson.

The programme supports teachers and schools to change one GCSE and/or A level exam text to one by an author of colour. It aims to tackle systemically the barriers schools face in making such a change. In 2024 we reviewed the pilot years of this programme and our research showed that across all racial groups, students experienced clear benefits when they studied books by authors of colour.

The benefits include:

- Students were more interested in English Literature as a school subject if they studied a text by an author of colour. This finding is crucial as A level English uptake has declined in popularity since 2015 (NATE, 2020)
- Classroom engagement was higher and students demonstrated greater capacity for lateral thinking and connections across the GCSE texts studied
- Students were more likely to report that they found the texts relevant to their lives and society

- Students felt they had increased empathy and understanding – a significant finding given the divisive rhetoric around race and migration in Britain today
- Teachers and students found the contextual knowledge gained from the texts to be of real value
- 2024 Pearson Edexcel Examiner Reports show students studying one of these texts achieved scores across the full range of marks, including at the very highest levels in their exams

While further research is necessary, these results concur with previous research such as Cabrera et al. (2014) and Cushing & Carter (2022) which show positive impacts from studying diverse texts.

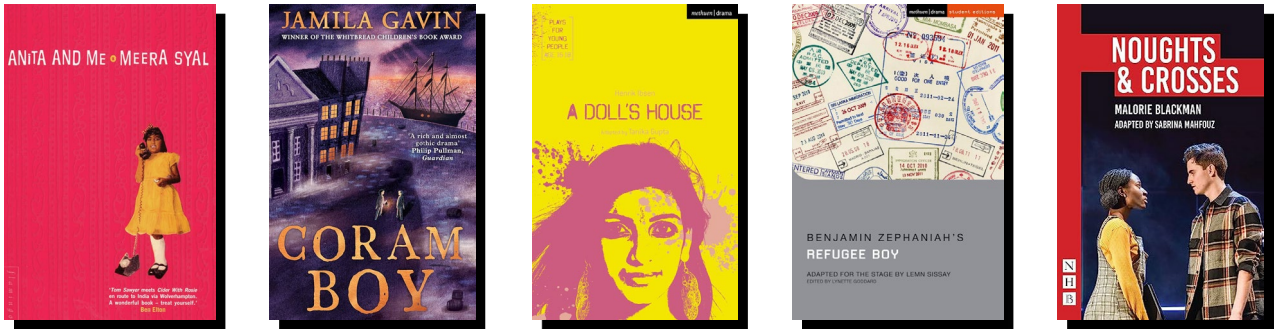
Exam boards have diversified their English literature specifications

GCSE and A level specifications are, of course, not the whole curriculum. But they send powerful messages about what and who is valued and significantly impact teacher behaviour and student experience. They are important indicators of diversity and representation in English Literature. The original Lit in Colour report, published in 2021, revealed that fewer than 1% of young people studied a book by an author of colour at GCSE.

Texts by authors of colour on GCSE examinations

	GCSE English Literature	GCSE Drama
2019	Meera Syal, <i>Anita and Me</i> (Pearson Edexcel, Eduqas, Cambridge OCR, AQA) Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Never Let Me Go</i> (Eduqas, Cambridge OCR, AQA)	–
2025*	Meera Syal, <i>Anita and Me</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2019) Tanika Gupta, <i>The Empress</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2019) Benjamin Zephaniah, adapted for the stage by Lemn Sissay, <i>Refugee Boy</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2019) Jamila Gavin, <i>Coram Boy</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2019) Malorie Blackman, <i>Boys Don't Cry</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2019; Eduqas 2023) Winsome Pinnock, <i>Leave Taking</i> (Cambridge OCR 2022; Eduqas 2023; AQA 2023) Chinonyerem Odimba, <i>Princess and the Hustler</i> (AQA 2023) Kit de Waal, <i>My Name is Leon</i> (AQA 2023)	In-Sook Chappell, <i>The Free9</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2021) Bola Agbaje, <i>Gone Too Far!</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2021) Henrik Ibsen, adapted by Tanika Gupta, <i>A Doll's House</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2021) Sophocles, adapted by Roy Williams' <i>Antigone</i> (Pearson Edexcel 2021) Malorie Blackman, adapted by Sabrina Mahfouz, <i>Noughts & Crosses</i> (Eduqas 2022; Cambridge OCR 2026) Benjamin Zephaniah, adapted by Lemn Sissay, <i>Refugee Boy</i> (Eduqas 2022) Tanika Gupta, <i>The Empress</i> (AQA 2023) Francis Turnly, <i>The Great Wave</i> (AQA 2023)

*Dates are of first teaching

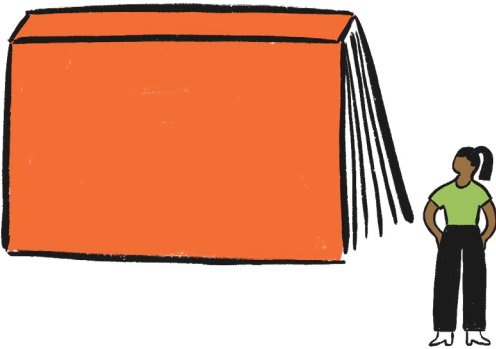


All four exam boards in England – Pearson, Cambridge OCR, Eduqas and AQA – are partners in the Lit in Colour campaign. Over the past five years all four have diversified their text offerings at GCSE and A Level English Literature, Drama and Theatre Studies². In 2019 there were 17 different GCSE English Literature set texts across the four exam boards in England – of which two were by authors of colour (*Never Let Me Go* and *Anita and Me*). Some texts appear on the specifications of more than one exam board. **In 2025 there are 22 different texts, eight of which are by authors of colour, mostly of Black and South Asian heritage. This is a change from 12% of texts to 36% of texts.**

This is a significant step forward. It is notable that most of the new authors are women, which begins to address the underrepresentation of women on the curriculum (particularly women of colour featured on the set text lists). Our original 2021 research revealed that fewer than 7% of GCSE English Literature candidates studied a female author.

We welcome this progress and look forward to further diversification. We hope future curriculum development will consider wider representation of both authors and protagonists, including for example the Gypsy Roma Traveller community, Eastern European, South East Asian and North African people.

All exam boards have also made changes to the poetry selections which form a compulsory component of GCSE English Literature. Three of them chose to make changes to the existing anthologies, swapping out old poems and adding additional ones by authors of colour. AQA created a new dedicated anthology, *Worlds and Lives*, which was studied by 20,000 students for examination in 2025. There are more than double the number of poems by authors of colour spread across the anthologies from all exam boards in 2025 (50 poems) compared to 2019 (23 poems). Notably all three Cambridge OCR clusters of poetry have high representation of authors of colour.



Most of the new authors are women, which begins to address the underrepresentation of women on the curriculum

The first Lit in Colour report noted that teachers have a greater level of comfort teaching individual poems by authors of colour, which often focus on themes of identity and migration, rather than adopting a full-length novel or play. Historically the poems taught by authors of colour frequently focus on challenges with identity and suffering associated with racism (Elliott & Courtney, 2023), but some new poems have a more positive tone. We continue to advocate that while poetry is a good first step for representation, it is not sufficient: it should happen alongside full-length texts.

We also note that new texts can present new challenges: even when schools change their texts, teacher confidence can mean that themes of race in the texts are avoided. Some, for example, focus on the homophobia in *Boys Don't Cry* rather than issues of racism. New cover illustrations have made the protagonist's race more explicit, but its

2 Lit in Colour was not involved in the choice of specific texts

treatment as a 'discovery' late in the book can reduce opportunities to discuss interracial friendships. *My Name is Leon* is another example: discussions with teachers showed that some focused on the White characters over Black characters. Some assumed the concept of 'adultification' was about children acting like adults, as opposed to Leon's character being adultified by state services due to his physique – a common form of racism experienced by Black children.

We advocate for explicit discussion about themes of racial representation, racism and empire where they appear in texts. Teaching texts which incorporate racist characters or behaviour without calling them out risks normalising them (whether or not the text is written by an author of colour). This includes older texts that have become part of the educational canon, for example *Of Mice and Men* which features racist slurs that require care (Elliott, 2025b).

Previous work on representation in the curriculum has used the concept of 'recognition' (Taylor, 1994):

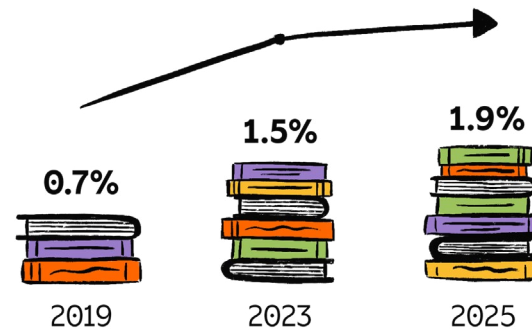
our identity is partly shaped by recognitions or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994, p. 25)

Children of colour should not see themselves represented in the classroom only in negative contexts – for example only seeing Black people in texts where they are enslaved or abused minor characters. Greater engagement with modern texts can mean that young people are more affected by the emotional resonances, which also requires careful handling by teachers (see the Swan School Case Study).

Greater diversity of set texts has not significantly changed the student experience

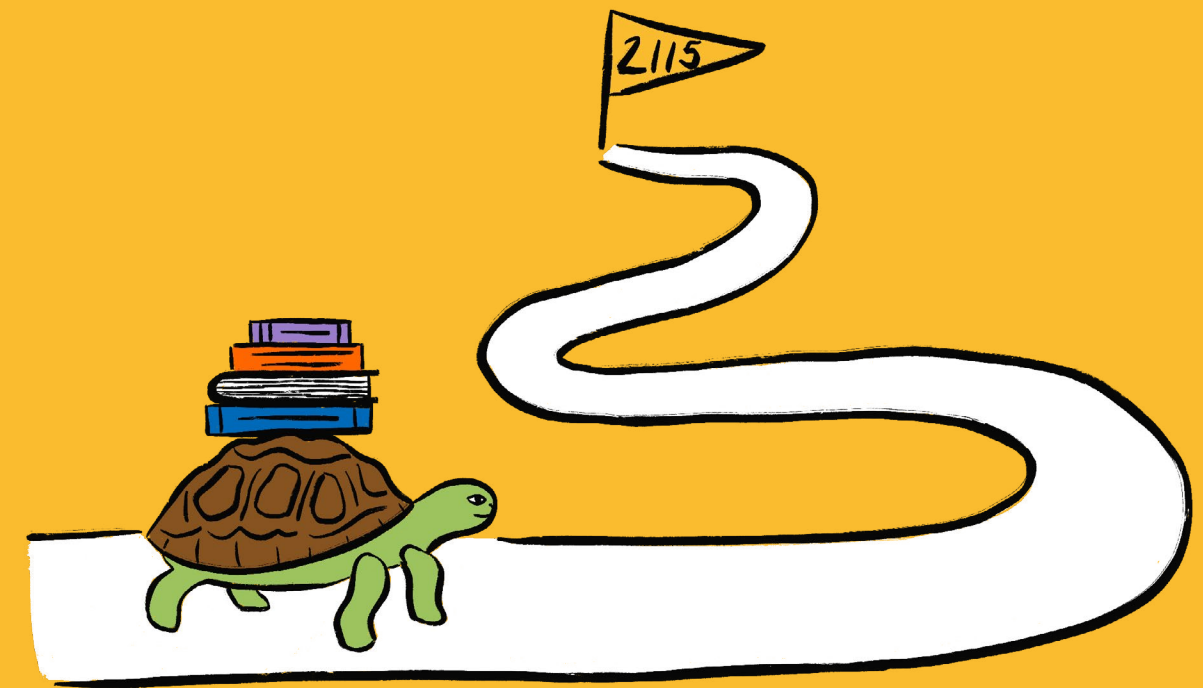
GCSE English Literature currently requires students to study a Shakespeare play, a 19th century novel and a modern text. The specification changes outlined above did prompt some change in text choice in schools. Between 2019 and 2023 the number of students studying a text by an author of colour doubled. The rate of increase has slowed since then, with an increase of only 0.4% of candidates. This is despite 2025 being the first year of examination for all new texts.

Percentage (%) of students studying a GCSE text by an author of colour in England:



Specification change is clearly necessary but this data shows it is far from sufficient: specification change alone does not diversify the English experience for all students or address the systemic lack of access they face to studying novels or plays written by authors of colour.

We observe that specification changes have only led to major behaviour change when they are accompanied by significant effort and investment to support teachers to adopt new texts. The Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot is one such intervention. The pilot addressed the barrier of money by supplying new texts to schools for free. It helped to address subject knowledge and confidence by offering



If our goal was for 38% of students to study a text by an author of colour, we might get there some time around 2115.

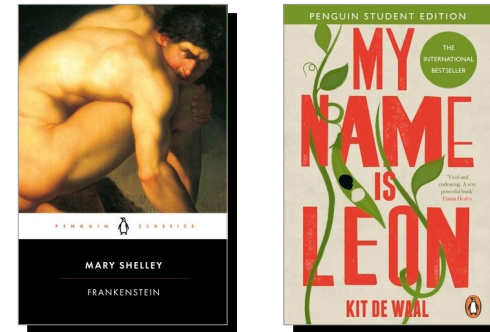
Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers. The publication of Lit in Colour-supported teaching resources for texts from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 5 has also made a substantive difference to these barriers in the past five years.

Still, on a national level the change in terms of student experience is modest. At this rate of progress, 10% of students would be studying a text by an author of colour in 2046. If our goal was for 38% of students – the current proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic British school students – to study a text by an author of colour, we might get there some time around 2115.

In fact, our goal is for all students to have the opportunity to study these texts, not only students of colour. Children need both a mirror for their own lives but also a window into the lives of others and books offer this opportunity.

When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all children, they will see we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us all human (Sims Bishop, 1990, p. xi).

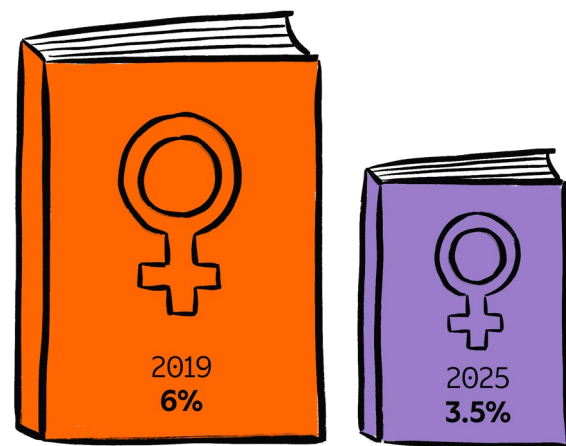
We note that, like authors of colour, women authors are systemically under-taught for examination. This issue is



outside the formal scope of the Lit in Colour campaign and research but surely merits similar attention.

The first Lit in Colour report showed that in 2019, 6% of candidates answered on a 19th century text by a woman. In 2025 that figure is **only 3.5%**³. The number of students answering on a modern text by a woman has increased, largely because most of the texts added (and particularly the ones chosen) are by women of colour, sitting at 1.6% (compared to c. 1% in 2019). Without the new texts by authors of colour, the decrease in overall texts by women would have been greater. Because the figures for modern and 19th century texts are not mutually exclusive (some students answer on a text by a woman in both sections – for example, studying *My Name is Leon* along with *Frankenstein*), we can say that **a maximum of 5.5% of students answer on a text by a woman at GCSE**, compared to a maximum of 7% in 2019. The figures suggest that the most popular texts from 2019, which were *An Inspector Calls* in the Modern text and *A Christmas Carol* in the 19th century, have extended their share of the market. This is probably attributable to the ‘safety’ of these texts – they are a known quantity with plenty of ready-to-teach resources.

Low take up shows that in order to improve the pace of change, schools must be provided with support to teach more full-length texts by authors of colour and women authors at both GCSE and A level, and embedded into the National Curriculum for earlier Key Stages.



³ This is based on the text selection data provided to us by the exam boards

Recommendation 3:

Significant, sustained investment is required to develop equitable resources for teaching texts by authors of colour and to support schools to teach new texts. Teachers also require support to engage with themes of race, racism and empire where they appear in 19th century novels.

Sustained progress at scale requires significant focus and funding

As we have shown in this report, the investment and attention of the Lit in Colour campaign and its many committed partners over the past five years has produced an important-but-modest change in the teaching of English. We advocate that significant further progress now requires sustained attention and investment from a much broader coalition of partners. That investment should focus on four areas in particular:

Equitable resources and materials

Our first Lit in Colour report found that English teachers lack confidence and subject knowledge when it comes to teaching texts by authors of colour, with only 12% of secondary teachers receiving training on how to talk about race as part of their initial teacher training. These two barriers are connected to the fact that few people study texts by authors of colour at each stage of English Literature from primary through to university level, and they are often optional rather than embedded across the curriculum.

Addressing these barriers is important as without deliberate intervention, the same texts and perspectives

are taught repeatedly. This results in young people missing out on the opportunity to study a diverse curriculum and experience the benefits that studying texts by authors of colour achieves for all students – including increased empathy, belonging and understanding.

Many teachers improve their subject knowledge about books by authors of colour by using and sharing published resources. Study guides for new texts are beginning to appear from publishers, exam boards have offered resources to support their launch of new texts, and booksellers have supported primary schools to compile diverse texts. The emergence of new resources for teaching texts by authors of colour has been a welcome development in recent years, and the Curriculum and Assessment Review specifically highlighted the importance of ‘high-quality exemplification resources’ (2025, p. 52) in supporting diversity and inclusion in the curriculum. However, the provision of resources is still not comparable to that for legacy texts. Educational publishing is a market, and investment from commercial providers naturally follows the popular texts. Correspondingly, the text choices made by schools and teachers are influenced by the availability of resources, creating a feedback loop.

In the first Lit in Colour report, teachers outlined how complex acquiring and exploring this new knowledge

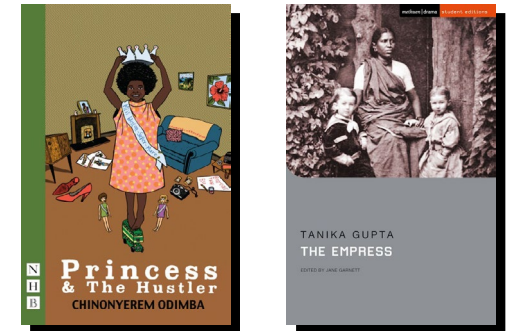
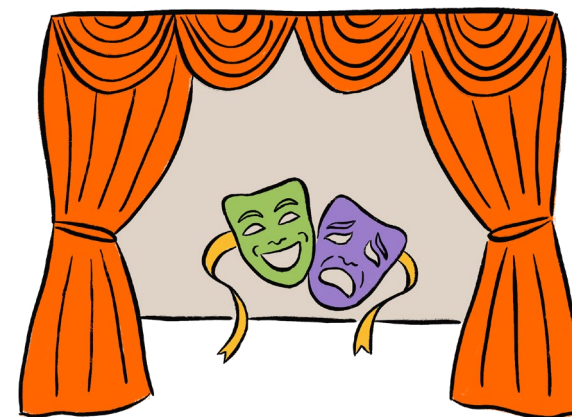


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by a writer of colour.**

in the classroom can be as it can elicit strong emotional responses from students, teachers and parents. Therefore, resources need to include prompts for teachers to work reflectively with content material, to provide an appropriate supportive experience for their own school context.

Many resources which teachers use rely on peer networks but time limits what teachers can produce for themselves. Lit in Colour CPD sessions have led to resource sharing between teachers but investment still needs to be made in the development, sharing and promotion of existing and new resources. It is essential that resources are developed with input from those with appropriate expertise in race, empire and racism.

Film and television adaptations, as well as filmed versions of stage productions, are an important resource for teachers. In the last few years this has included a second staging of *The Empress* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, a new production of *Princess and the Hustler* and an adaptation of *The Lonely Londoners*, and a television adaption of *My Name is Leon*. Investment is required to film play performances and make previous productions available to schools, as well as ensuring film or TV adaptations of set texts are available on an ongoing basis.



Where teachers are supported to develop their subject knowledge about texts by authors of colour and their confidence to discuss the themes these texts raise, they are able to create the classroom conditions necessary to enable students of all backgrounds to meaningfully engage and benefit.

Developing research

Since the first Lit in Colour report, several small studies have been conducted which demonstrate the impacts of studying literature by authors of colour (notably those funded by the UKLA small grants, e.g. Cushing & Carter, 2022 and Kneen et al, 2022; and Teach First's *Missing Pages* report (2020)). While positive, further research is required on the effects of studying literature by authors of colour and how this impacts students' sense of belonging and overall school attitudes.

Research is also required into how to support the teaching of these texts most effectively, and how to develop the most effective professional development programmes that close the subject knowledge gap, and foster teachers' ability to talk about race, empire and racism in relation to texts with their students. This is an underfunded field of research overall, but evidence suggests that longer term, subject specific CPD is most effective in supporting improved teaching and learning, and therefore student outcomes (Cordingley et al., 2015).



A related field which needs further research investment beyond Sharp & Aston (2024) is the recruitment, retention and promotion of teachers who identify as being Black, Asian or from other racially minoritised backgrounds. According to the government's School teacher workforce facts and figures, as of 2025, 2.9% of teachers are Black, 5.8% are Asian, 1.9% are Mixed-race, and 88.6% are White*. Additionally, there are just 30 teachers from Gypsy Roma Traveller Communities out of more than half a million teachers in the country, and none of them are headteachers. Teachers of colour tend to make up the general classroom population and are further underrepresented in leadership roles. For example, there

are 1.2% Black headteachers, 2% Asian headteachers, 1.1% Mixed-race headteachers, and the remaining 95.3% of headteachers are White*. More specifically, there has been a systemic underrepresentation of English teachers of colour. 75% of teachers who responded to the survey in the first report revealed they had never been taught English by a teacher who was Black, Asian or from another minoritised background. As stated by Joseph-Salisbury's (2020) report on *Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools* (Runnymede Trust, 2020), we agree that greater recruitment of teachers from Black, Asian and other racially minoritised backgrounds is needed.

Direct funding for schools

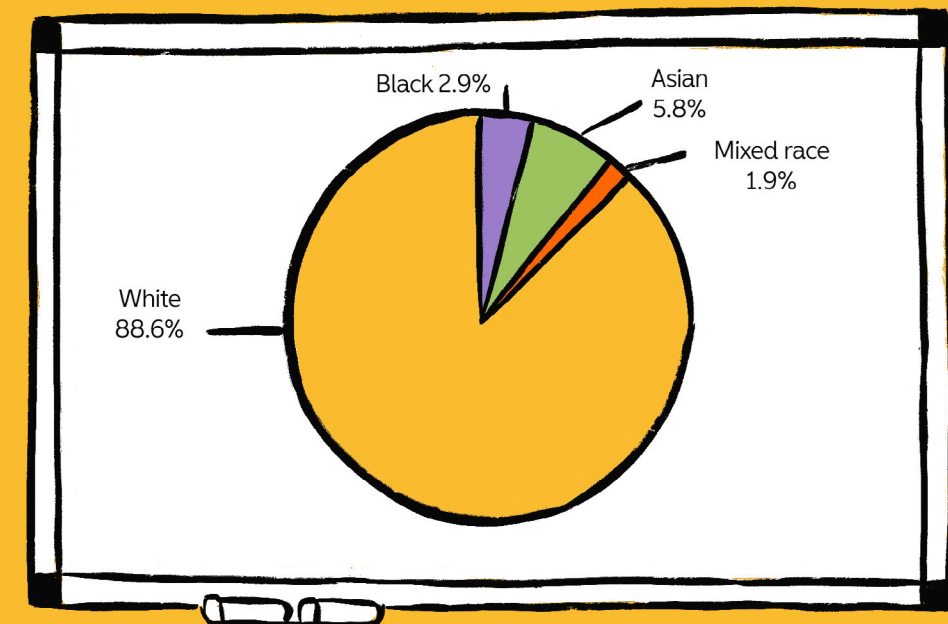
The Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot tackled the money barrier by providing books to participating schools free of charge. However, it is not sustainable for publishers to absorb these costs on a national scale. Government funding is required to support a wider range of schools.

Schools need to be able to buy set texts, library books by authors of colour across all Key Stages, and non-fiction books to develop teacher knowledge. Schools' engagement with books by authors of colour should not be constrained by goodwill or what is out of copyright. Effective professional development requires time and often funding. A nationally funded and accredited programme, free at the point of access, is one answer to this.

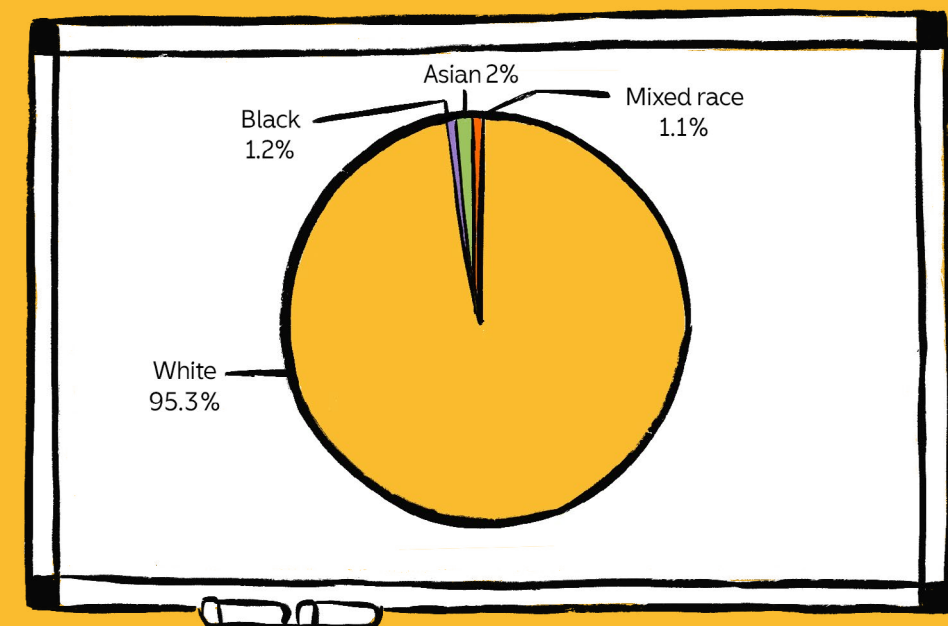
* Data taken from GOV. UK rounds percentages to one decimal place.

Schools need to be able to buy set texts, library books by authors of colour across all Key Stages

Teachers in 2025



Headteachers in 2025



These charts do not include the % of individuals in the 'Other' category from GOV.UK data.

Our original research identified four barriers that inhibit schools from teaching authors of colour:



Subject knowledge



Time



Money



Teacher confidence

One of the ways the Lit in Colour campaign has sought to address the barriers of teacher subject knowledge and confidence has been through the Lit in Colour Teacher Conference. The 2023 conference was held virtually in collaboration with Tes and 900 participants joined. The 2025 in-person conference was in partnership with the British Library and over 120 teachers attended. These conferences provide professional development through a combination of author and teacher led sessions, and a networking space, for primary and secondary teachers to learn more about the new texts on the curriculum and shape the delivery of this knowledge in their classrooms. Over 95% of delegates at both conferences agreed or strongly agreed that the conference had increased their confidence to teach texts by authors of colour.

While the CPD that has been provided over the last five years grants expert teachers an opportunity to share their knowledge more widely, and teachers who opt-in to ask questions and share resources, these sessions are often ad-hoc. Since our original Lit in Colour research in 2021, we have advocated for initial teacher education to include training about how to talk about race and racism with pupils, so English teachers can develop pedagogical knowledge about discussing and developing teaching activities connected to these themes where they appear in books. In addition to updating initial teacher training frameworks, funding is also required for CPD providers working with in-service teachers so their knowledge development and confidence continues to grow.

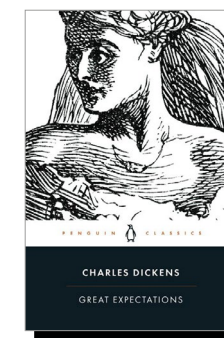
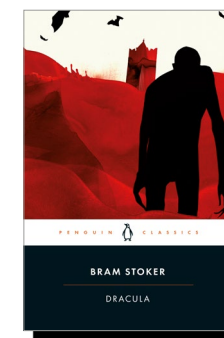
Teaching 19th century novels in their historical context

Five years on from the first Lit in Colour report, we continue to believe that 19th century texts have a strong place in the English curriculum and

are an important part of young people's learning. This is supported by polling by Public First for Lit in Colour, which found that 46% of students and 65% of parents want a balanced curriculum that features both classics and modern-day works. With the Curriculum and Assessment Review's decision that 19th century novels will remain a core part of GCSE English Literature, we continue to advocate for these texts to be taught in their historical context, including engaging with themes of race, racism and empire where they appear.

Much of the literary 'canon' was written in 19th century London, which was a multicultural society at the centre of the global British Empire. It was awash with people, goods, and stories from across the world which informed storylines in many famous texts from the time. For example, there is no *Dracula* without colonisation; there is no *Great Expectations* without the convict who is transported to Australia and makes his fortune; and the fortunes of several Austen characters depend on slavery, plantations or naval expansion.

there is, of course, nothing more imperial than the most British drink of all: a cup of sweetened tea. – Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland*



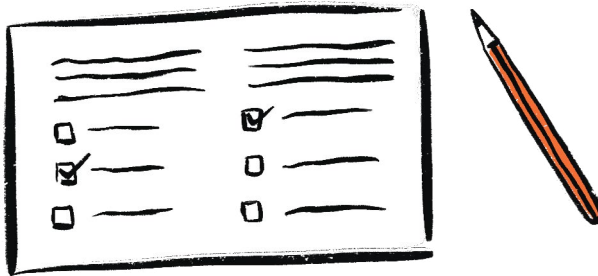
Teaching and learning canonical texts in their entirety and making the connection to present day can also speak to the diversity in our schools and country. They can enable all of us to see the ways in which British culture is enmeshed with international cultures, tastes, foods, and other things imported from other countries. Including contextual knowledge of race, racism and empire when teaching canonical texts enables students to understand those texts better and can function as 'powerful knowledge' in the classroom (Muller & Young, 2019; Macaluso & Macaluso, 2019; Elliott, 2025a). Therefore, teachers should be supported to consider what perspectives the author focuses on and why, as well as alternative perspectives that may be missing. Teachers can also explore how this context informs the perspectives they prioritise in classroom discussions, which is connected to their own histories, cultures, values, knowledges and understandings of texts (see Apple, 1971).

So what can I do?

Lit in Colour’s suggestions for schools, exam boards, publishers, government and individuals

Back in 2021, our headline research finding – that fewer than 1% of students studied a book by an author of colour – prompted two main reactions. The initial shock tended to be followed a simple question: what can I do?

Five years on, we have updated and revised our ideas for the many stakeholders who share our vision of a more diverse, representative and engaging English curriculum. We summarise the main points here and welcome engagement with all stakeholders on a wider range of ideas.



For Policy, Government, Research & Funders

1. Ensure all students have access to an inclusive and representative English curriculum. The rewritten National Curriculum for English across primary and secondary schools should ensure every student has the opportunity to study or engage with texts by authors of colour and by women in all Key Stages.
2. All GCSE and A level English Literature candidates should have the opportunity to study a full-length novel or play by an author of colour.
3. Make funding available for pilot incentivisation programmes that enable schools to change a text to one by an author of colour and provides teachers with the necessary tools (training, learning resources, etc.) to effectively teach a new text, building on Lit in Colour’s research.
4. Reform Teachers’ Standards, the Initial Teacher Training Early Career Framework, and standards for National Professional Qualifications to require ongoing professional development for in-service teachers on inclusion, diversity and representation.
5. Collect and publish data on the ethnicity of teachers training by subject.

For Ofqual and Exam Boards

1. Review and standardise approaches for selection of new set texts, deploying appropriate expertise.
2. Track the adoption and impact of texts by authors of colour, including gathering information about the progress and barriers to these texts.
3. Provide clear guidance, resources, and exemplar content to support the teaching of diverse texts and themes of race, racism and empire where they appear in texts. Mark scheme indicative content should explicitly include these concepts where they appear in canonical texts.
4. Provide funding and support to remove barriers such as lack of time, budget, resources, and gaps in subject knowledge that prevent teachers from teaching books by authors of colour.

For Initial Teacher Education providers and national organisations

1. Support early-career teachers to build confidence in discussing race, racism, empire, and migration in heritage and contemporary texts.
2. Increase provision for in-service teachers to teach inclusive curricula on an ongoing basis, and build confidence in discussing race, racism, empire and migration in the classroom

For Parents, Young People, and the General Public

1. Have discussions with children about race, representation, and diversity in literature and culture.
2. Support your school teaching diverse texts.
3. Support diverse reading habits. For example, review your child’s bookshelves to see how many books are by authors of colour or feature protagonists of colour.





For Schools and English Teachers

1. Critically reflect on departmental approaches to teaching texts by authors of colour. Audit the representation of characters of colour across the curriculum, and embed activities and discussions that address stereotypes.
2. Introduce more diverse and more modern texts into English teaching.
3. Share the resources you create with other teachers to reach more students and increase text-swapping.
4. Reflect on your own cultural background and subject knowledge around race, racism and empire in the texts you teach.
5. Develop your skills around talking about these concepts in the classroom, drawing on CPD and support from school leaders.
6. Explore themes of race, racism, and empire across the curriculum, including in canonical texts.

For Publishers and the wider Creative Industries

1. Actively engage with the findings of the CLPE's *Reflecting Realities* report.
2. Continue to focus on building a diverse pipeline of authors and other creative talent.
3. Work in partnership with drama schools, theatre companies and major UK broadcasters to stage and record productions of new set text plays, which are then made available for schools.
4. Make recordings of past theatre productions available to schools.
5. Those with books or plays on the curriculum: create supporting resources that engage with concepts around race, racism, migration and empire where they appear in texts, to build teacher confidence and subject knowledge.

Appendices

Appendix i: A note on terminology

As we noted in the first Lit in Colour report:

“The language related to race and racialisation (assigning ethnic or racial identities to a group from the outside) has always been contested; there are not fixed categories or definitions and the terminology is always political. Terms relating to race are closely tied into personal and collective identities and preferences; they rely on connotations as well as denotations.” (Elliott et al. 2021, p. 10).

As before, here we explain some of the decisions made in relation to terminology. In the first report we used the term Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). The terminology is problematic in that it conceals inequalities between different groups and it is not a category with which individuals identify. As usage has moved on, we have too: in this report we refer to people of colour, although this has similar problems with erosion of differences between specific groups. Its use here is inclusive of all racially minoritised groups in the UK, including Gypsy Roma Traveller communities. The data from the survey by Public First uses the term ‘minoritised ethnic background’ and so where we refer to this data that is the term we have used.

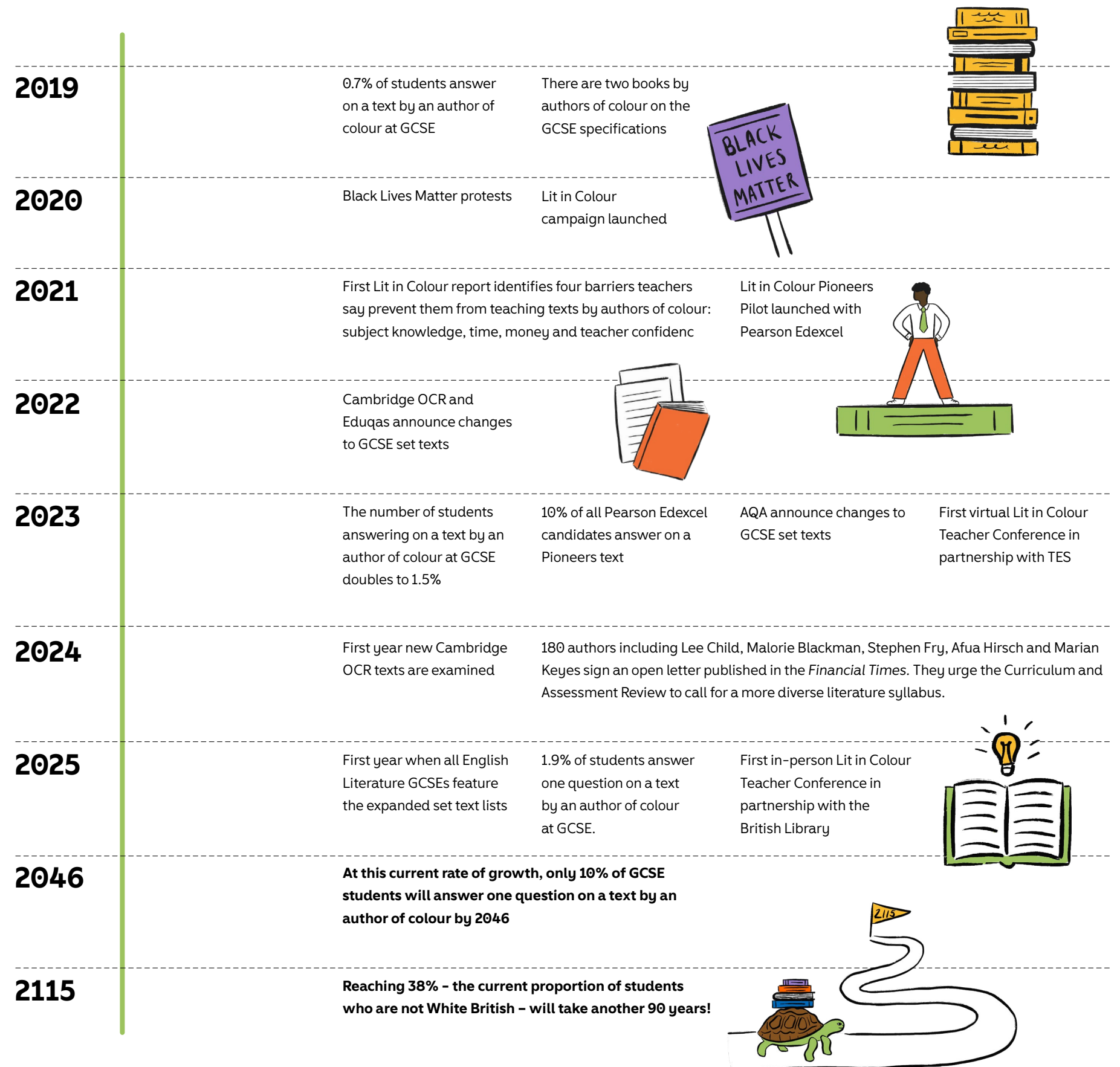
In this report we refer to ‘authors of colour’ in relation to the texts. This is consistent with the first Lit in Colour

report and appropriate in relation to the racial heritage of the authors of the texts in question. As before we recognise that race is a social construct, principally created as the object of racism. We have capitalised ‘White’ to reflect that Whiteness is also a construct. To be White is not a neutral state (i.e. Eddo-Lodge 2017). The word ‘diversity’ is also used in relation to reading and curriculum. The focus here is primarily on the diversity of ethnicity in authors and characters, but diversity also includes many other categories which are underrepresented in our curriculum and school texts, including but not limited to LGBTQIA+ and disabled people. It is also worth acknowledging that the word ‘Pioneers’ has specific connotations in relation to the colonisation of the USA. In the Lit in Colour Pioneers Programme the word refers to the idea of being early adopters, but we recognise that the word has difficult connotations for some groups.



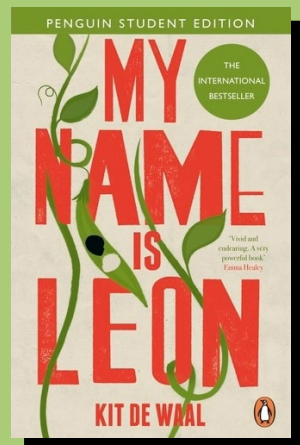
Appendix ii: Lit in Colour highlights and timeline

- ✓ **280,000 books** donated to more than 1,300 UK primary and secondary schools
- ✓ **2,650 teachers** attended free training and webinars
- ✓ **750,000 students** impacted through school library donations
- ✓ **80,400 downloads** of primary resources from Twinkl
- ✓ **300 free teaching resources** produced by campaign partners including multimedia author videos
- ✓ **36% of GCSE English Literature set texts** are by authors of colour compared to 12% in 2019
- ✓ **300 schools** and **32,450 students** supported to study a GCSE or A level text by authors of colour since 2021 through the Lit in Colour Pioneers Programme
- ✓ **23 schools** planning to teach *Boys Don't Cry* by Malorie Blackman and/or *Leave Taking* by Winsome Pinnock to approximately **2,880 students** through the Eduqas Lit in Colour Key Stage 4 Support Programme pilot



Appendix iii:

Case study: The Swan School



If you visit The Swan School in Marston, Oxford, you will be struck by the sheer range of authors and characters represented in the collection curated by librarian Dr Tessa Roynon.

When the school opened in 2019 Head of English Harriet Hinze took the opportunity of a clean slate to design a curriculum that was rich in multicultural experience. The wide variety of texts they study – including *Purple Hibiscus* in Year 8 – offers a broad exploration of world literature. Texts like *Frankenstein* are taught with an awareness of coloniality and race science, and Hinze notes that once you start looking at texts with race consciousness it becomes inescapable. She takes *Lord of the Flies* and its use of the word ‘savage’ as an example of embedded racism which has the potential to be uncritically passed over.

The school previously taught *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. When that book was taken off the syllabus, they switched to a new set text for AQA GCSE – *My Name is Leon* by Kit de Waal. Hinze is glad they did. The cohort’s marks were significantly better on the modern text questions than other ones and they outperformed the previous year’s students, despite coming in with lower prior attainment. In particular, the book seems to have gone down well with boys, with more of them opting for A level English Literature than in earlier year groups. For The Swan School, *My Name is Leon*’s status as a coming-of-age novel, where the protagonist moves from a lack of autonomy to gaining power, resonates strongly with the students.

“There was a real sense of positivity this year when students went into the exam; they genuinely enjoyed it,” Hinze recalls. “There was real enthusiasm and buy-in for the text and the students were excited to write about it.”

The key barrier for the school to overcome was the lack of resources for a new text on the curriculum. However, teachers knew it was possible to write their own curriculum and despite being a major investment of time and effort, they succeeded. This was supported through a strong collaboration with the school library and grounded in Hinze’s academic background. Since then, the school has been sharing their resources with other schools.

Antos, Year 11

“I feel like I really want to study and explore more books, explore more stories and actually experience more worlds because I’ve realised that reading isn’t just about reading words on the page. It’s about feeling another person, and feeling what the person, like goes through. Yeah, overall, *My Name is Leon* had a really massive impact on me.”

Luden, Year 11

“I think *My Name is Leon* has encouraged me to sort of look for books, and it shows that not all books are, like, just plain and simple about one perspective of life. So I just think it’s nice to read those type of books.”

Banna, Year 11

“Before studying *My Name is Leon*, I definitely didn’t think that I was going to do English, because I like really struggled with English. But I feel like now, just like, you know, going through *My Name is Leon*, and like fully understanding the novel, I just feel like now I think I could do English A level.”

Albert, Year 11

“So following studying *My Name is Leon*, I would like to study English Literature at A level because I find it interesting studying a range of different perspectives.”

Harriet Hinze sums up:

“*My Name is Leon* has everything you want in a text – it’s got really interesting metaphors – about gardening and the allotment – and it really speaks to a period of history which feels distinctively all about Black British historical contexts that kids need to know about. It has really interesting stuff to say about women. And there is a real clarity about the racism which makes it actually quite straightforward to teach. It’s not a grey area, there’s no difficulty with the kids understanding that.”

As enjoyable as students found *My Name is Leon*, the department highlights that particular care is required in its teaching. This is especially so if there are students in the class with experiences of the foster and care system. Teachers have worked closely with parents and guardians to support these students while the text is being studied. Teachers observe that the combination of subject knowledge and pastoral care has been essential to the successful introduction of this text.



Appendix iv: GCSE text choice data 2025

The following tables show the percentage of candidates answering on each text by exam board. Texts by authors of colour are highlighted in bold⁴.

AQA

An Inspector Calls	85.12%
Lord of the Flies	4.79%
Blood Brothers	4.11%
Animal Farm	3.04%
DNA	1.33%
My Name is Leon	0.43%
Pigeon English	0.42%
A Taste of Honey	0.23%
Leave Taking	0.20%
Telling Tales	0.20%
Princess & The Hustler	0.09%
Anita & Me	0.04%

Pearson Edexcel

An Inspector Calls	62.5%
Journey’s End	8%
Boys Don’t Cry	5.8%
Animal Farm	5.5%
Blood Brothers	5.3%
The Empress	4%
Lord of the Flies	3.6%
Refugee Boy	2.7%
The Woman in Black	1.4%
Hobson’s Choice	0.7%
Coram Boy	0.4%
Anita and Me	0.2%

Cambridge OCR

An Inspector Calls	59.18%
Animal Farm	22.6%
Never Let Me Go	8.8%
Leave Taking	7.1%
Anita and Me	2.11%
DNA	0.21%

Eduqas

An Inspector Calls	78.2%
Blood Brothers	12.9%
Lord of the Flies	5%
Woman in Black	1.1%
Leave Taking	0.8%
Boys Don’t Cry	0.7%
Anita and Me	0.7%
The Curious Incident of the Dog In the Night Time (play)	0.5%
History Boys	0.5%
Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit	0.3%

⁴ This data always comes with the caveat that it represents what students answer on, which is not always the same as what they studied in school. It is also generated by examiners entering question numbers in to the system so there may be some margin of human error. Two of the tables come up to slightly over 100% because of this; we rounded to 1 decimal place and they are mostly a lot more than that. We are grateful to our exam board partners for supplying this data.



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