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Teaching Key Stage 3 literature: the challenges of accountability, gender and diversity

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study, conducted in parts of Wales and southwest England, focusing on what literature is being taught to learners aged 11–14 years. By exploring this area, we gain insight into influences on teacher choices and the challenges faced by teachers. Our research, which included a survey of over 170 teachers as well as teacher interviews, provides a snapshot of young people's experiences studying literature in the early secondary years (Key Stage 3). The results show that while some schools provide variety and diversity in their choice of texts and authors, the majority provide a limited diet of literature with texts mainly from male writers, with male protagonists. Girls are rarely the main focus. Nor do the majority of children study literature written by or about those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, highlighting a lack of diversity. Literature teaching at Key Stage 3 is increasingly influenced by the demands of GCSE and exam accountability. We hope the study can act as a catalyst for discussion about what ought to be the purpose and focus of literature study in England, Wales and beyond.

Key words: literature, novel, poetry, plays, Key Stage 3, secondary, gender, diversity

Introduction

Literature is a central part of the English curriculum in England and Wales (DfE, 2013; Welsh Government, 2016)[1] with "rarely questioned status" (Goodwyn, 2012, p. 212). It contributes to how young people engage with language, culture and social values, as well as being "a crucial gateway into experiences and worlds that we may never ourselves encounter" (Sundorph, 2020, p. 6). While exam board 'set texts' dictate the literature studied by those aged 14 and above, teachers choose texts for the 11–14 age group. However, "official rhetorics and assessment regimes" (Sundorph, 2020), together with limited budgets, have impinged on teacher autonomy in the choice of texts. The situation is not unique to the United Kingdom; Australia (McLean Davies et al., 2013; McLean Davies, Martin, and Buzacott, 2021), Singapore (Loh, 2018), Malaysia (Lim, 2020) and the United States (Wolf, 2003) recognise the need to "select with care" (Wolf, 2003, p. 164). While the data for this study were collected in England and Wales, the findings will resonate more widely.

Previous studies of young people's reading tend to focus on students' independent reading (Clarke, 2018; Clarke and Tervainen, 2017; Topping, 2018). This article, therefore, addresses a gap in the research literature by exploring teachers' choices of text, how texts are taught as well as the possible implications of teachers' choices.

The study was carried out by researchers from six universities (in Wales and the southwest of England) and was funded by a UKLA Research Award. It focuses on Key Stage 3 (KS3) in England and Wales (pupils aged 11–14 years). This precedes study for GCSE examinations,[2] which are externally assessed and are usually taken at age 15–16 years.

Influences on the teaching of literature

As a subject, literature has "low paradigm consensus" – that is, "a very low level agreement about what counts as knowledge in the subject" (Knights, 2015, p. 7). The current emphasis on *knowledge* in teaching, prompted by Hirsch (2007) and Young (2013), has led

[1]In England, the Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) is subject to the statutory guidance from the Department for Education. In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales is subject to the statutory guidance published by Welsh Government.

[2]GCSE is and externally examined qualification, taken by pupils aged 16 in both England and Wales.

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to a focus on knowledge and vocabulary in English teaching. This position is challenged by Bleiman (2020), who argues that literature is about the engagement of students with the worlds, ideas and characters that inhabit texts, rather than a body of knowledge.

Eaglestone (2009) notes the continued influence of the canon, tracing the Leavisite legacy with its "authoritative list of great literary works" (Eaglestone, 2009, p. 15) such as Chaucer, Austen and Shakespeare. The canon enacts cultural values and representations (Nelson-Addy et al., 2018) in a curriculum dominated by mainly western European, male, white authors (Coles, 2013; Cox, 1991; Eaglestone, 2009). Truman et al. (2021) uses *To Kill a Mockingbird* to examine the persistence of the text in the canon of the Australian curriculum, a text, which is problematic in itself and has little direct relevance to Australian students. The question then arises of what constitutes knowledge in English in students' own contexts (McLean Davies, Truman and Buzacott, 2021b; Truman et al., 2021; Yates et al., 2019). While teachers at KS3 have choice in literature, such choice is dependent on their knowledge of the field. A study undertaken with primary practitioners, however, suggests that teachers' knowledge of current children's and, by extension, young adult literature is limited (Cremin et al., 2014).

Since the inception of the National Curriculum in 1988, the debate has continued about the prescription or otherwise of specific texts (Goodwyn, 2011). The only prescribed author was Shakespeare although recommended authors have appeared in subsequent iterations. Political influence continued, however, with the removal from GCSE English Literature of texts written by authors from outside the British Isles – under what Bigsby (2014, quoted in Kennedy, 2014) calls the "union jack of culture" flown by the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove.

Another influence is the external pressures on teacher and school accountability (Ball, 2003; Leckie and Goldstein, 2017), which have led to preparation for GCSE dominating literature teaching even at KS3. This influences the style of teaching, with formulaic approaches such as PEE (point, evidence, explain) limiting student responses (Enstone, 2017; Gibbons, 2019). In the United States, Peel (2017) has explored similar concerns arising from the impact of the Common Core assessment on teachers' literature choices.

Methodology

We adopted a mixed methods approach to ascertain *what* is being taught and *how*, in order to attain a more complete picture (Denscombe, 2014). Through collecting, analysing, integrating and discussing qualitative and quantitative approaches within the one study (Tashakkori and Cresswell, 2007, p. 4), "the quantitative and qualitative components are mutually illuminating" (Bryman, 2007, p. 8).

Methods

Two main methods were adopted. An online survey of schools was conducted with the advantages of "speed and reach, ease, cost, flexibility and automation" (Ball, 2019, p. 413). All the researchers are initial teacher education (ITE) specialists, in the southwest of England and Wales, and the survey was sent to our ITE partnership schools. The survey was also promoted through the UKLA, eliciting further responses throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. Altogether, 175 responses were received, although not all were complete.

Schools were asked which prose, poetry and drama texts they taught to Years 7, 8 and 9.[3] Pre-populated lists were provided (over 50 texts), as well as free text boxes for other choices. Saris and Gallhofer (2014) explore the use of response alternatives in surveys and note that while closed responses (such as the pre-populated lists) facilitate analysis, they are limiting for the respondent (Denscombe, 2014). The option to include other texts aimed to mitigate this limitation. The items on the pre-populated list were selected based on the researchers' experience of working with schools. Respondents were also asked how many weeks the text was taught for and whether as a whole text or through extracts.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the respondents to the survey. Purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees (Bryman, 2016, p. 408). Nine teachers were interviewed from schools from in our ITE partnerships, chosen to represent a range of regions and contexts (Table 1). The interviews were semi-structured, to establish a consistent approach and allow flexibility while interviewing. Questions addressed areas such as the interviewees' philosophy of teaching literature, how literature choices were made and the status of literature in the school. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

The quantitative data from the survey were collated to provide rankings of the most popular texts by type. The most frequently named texts were either chosen

[3]Year 7 – age 11–12; Year 8 age 12–13; Year 9 – age 13–14.

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from a pre-populated list (termed commonly-used texts in the discussion) or were nominated by the teachers (termed teacher-suggested texts); both contributed to the rankings. The texts were analysed according to authorship, representation, period of study and whether taught as whole text or extracts. A qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret key themes arising from the open survey questions and the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial coding of the data took place, with all researchers analysing one interview, to establish key codes and categories. These were applied to the remaining interviews, and the researchers worked in pairs to analyse the interviews. Establishing a basic framework of themes made it easier to compare data from the schools, looking for similarities and differences in the later stages of the analysis.

What literature are we teaching?

Prose

The commonly-used texts taught in Years 7, 8 and 9 are limited in both date of publication and diversity of author and protagonist. In Year 7, only three of the texts date from the 21st century, and only one author is female (Table 2). Not only are all the protagonists male in these novels, many of them relate to stereotypically male concerns such as war and crime. The only female author listed, Rowling, is anecdotally credited with having made reading attractive to boys. The claim, however, has been comprehensively challenged (Sunderland et al., 2016), reminding us to be cautious about simple binaries regarding pupils' reading preferences. The Year 8 texts demonstrate a similar pattern (Table 3),

Table 1: Schools interviewed: A summary of the contextual details

School	*Region*	*Type*	*Number of pupils (range)*	*Age range*	*Gender*	*Entitled to free school meals (%)*
School A	South Wales	Comprehensive	1,500–2,000	11–18	Mixed	6
School B	Bristol	Academy	1,000–1,500	11–18	Mixed	33
School C	South West England	Academy	500–1,000	2–16	Mixed	30
School D	Somerset	Academy	1,500–2,000	11–18	Mixed	10
School E	South East Wales	Comprehensive	500–1,000	11–18	Mixed	26
School F	Somerset	Academy	1,000–1,500	11–18	Mixed	19
School G	West Wales	Comprehensive	1,000–1,500	11–18	Mixed	12
School H	Devon	Academy	1,000–1,500	11–18	Mixed	20
School I	Gloucestershire	Academy	1,000–1,500	11–18	Mixed	14

Academy is a designation of schools that applies in England only. Academies have autonomy over their curriculum although in practice tend to follow the National Curriculum. A comprehensive school is a non-selective school managed by a local education authority.

Table 2: Top ranking prose texts taught in Year 7

Year 7						
Rank	*Freq*	*Title*	*Author*	*Year*	*Author*	*Protag*
1	23	The Boy/Striped Pyjamas	Boyne	2006	M	M
2	22	Holes	Sachar	1998	M	M
3	21	Private Peaceful	Morpurgo	2003	M	M
4=	20	Boy	Dahl	1984	M	M
4=	20	Skellig	Almond	1998	M	M
6	13	A Monster Calls	Ness	2011	M	M
7	10	War Horse	Morpurgo	1982	M	M
8=	9	Animal Farm	Orwell	1945	M	M
8=	9	A Christmas Carol	Dickens	1843	M	M
8=	9	Harry Potter series	Rowling	From 1997	F	M

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although with three female authors and two female protagonists. Clearly, Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*) answers the need for a female character in the mould of action hero. The pattern is repeated in Year 9 (Table 4), with the addition of *To Kill a Mockingbird* which has migrated to KS3 since the prescription that GCSE texts should be British (as noted above).

Many of the novels listed are well-established, perhaps suggesting conservatism, but other factors may be at work. Evidence from interviews suggests that in some schools, funding is limited: a new set of novels for a class is a significant cost. There is also a drive to ensure that students are challenged: the decision to use texts in Year 9 formerly taught at GCSE, may be evidence of this.

Looking beyond the most popular texts, there is more diversity in terms of gender and date of publication in the teacher-suggested texts. There is a greater proportion of women writers, although men still outnumber women significantly (Figure 1). The gender of protagonists (Figure 2) is a more complex matter given the scope for multiple significant characters and indeed non-human protagonists. Overall, however, a similar pattern emerges, and students in KS3 classes are more likely to read a novel with a male protagonist than a female one, an experience noted by studies in other contexts (Coryat and Clemens, 2017).

There is less variety in the setting of novels listed by teachers (Figure 3); the pattern largely reflects the nationality and ethnicity of authors. Most are set in the United Kingdom or the United States and are by white authors from those countries. While it is important to beware of paying "lip service to representation" (Kara, 2021, p. 47), it is worth noting that there are few novels by Black and minority ethnic (BAME) British writers, with Patrice Lawrence and Malorie Blackman standing out as exceptions. The teacher-suggested texts do, however, include more novels published in the past 20 years than do the most

Table 3: Top ranking prose texts taught in Year 8

Year 8						
Rank	*Freq*	*Title*	*Author*	*Year*	*Author*	*Protag*
1	27	The Boy/Striped Pyjamas	Boyne	2006	M	M
2	18	Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck	1937	M	M
3	17	Animal Farm	Orwell	1945	M	M
4	16	The Hunger Games	Collins	2008	F	F
5	13	Stone Cold	Swindells	1993	M	M
6=	12	Holes	Sachar	1998	M	M
6=	12	Private Peaceful	Morpurgo	2003	M	M
8=	10	Frankenstein	Shelley	1818	F	M
8=	10	War Horse	Morpurgo	1982	M	M
10=	9	Nineteen Eighty-Four	Orwell	1949	M	M
10=	9	Noughts and Crosses	Blackman	2001	F	F&M

Table 4: Top ranking prose texts taught in Year 9

Year 9						
Rank	*Freq*	*Title*	*Author*	*Year*	*Author*	*Protag*
1	81	Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck	1937	M	M
2	20	A Christmas Carol	Dickens	1843	M	M
3	19	Stone Cold	Swindells	1993	M	M
4	15	Animal Farm	Orwell	1945	M	M
5	14	To Kill a Mockingbird	Lee	1960	F	F
6	13	Lord of the Flies	Golding	1956	M	M
7	12	Frankenstein	Shelley	1818	F	M
8	11	The Curious Incident …	Haddon	2003	M	M
9	9	The Hunger Games	Collins	2008	F	F
10	8	Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde	Stevenson	1886	M	M

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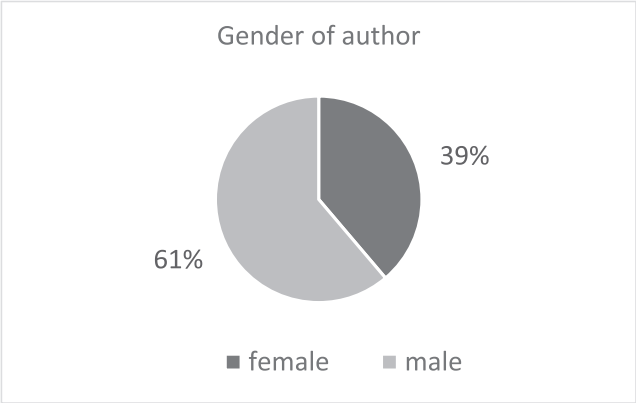


Figure 1: The gender of author in teacher-suggested texts.

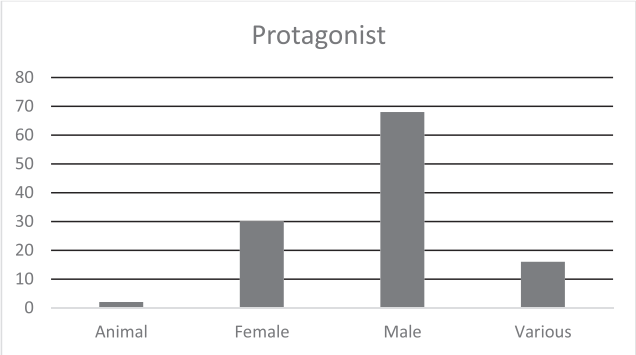


Figure 2: The gender of protagonist.

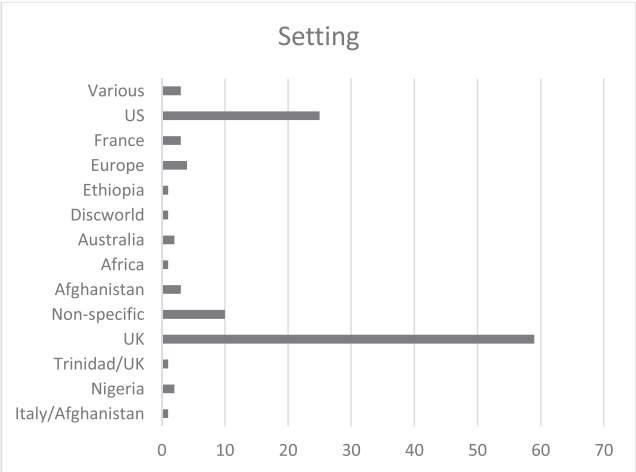


Figure 3: Settings of teacher-suggested texts.

popular of the commonly used texts (Figure 4). The majority of novels in this group were published in the past 20 years, demonstrating that teachers are refreshing the repertoire of novels. Young people are being offered novels which reflect contemporary life, either through a realistic representation or through genres such as fantasy or dystopia (Figure 5).

When choosing texts, teachers seek to balance challenge with accessibility. They want to give their students the experience of reading a whole text, as

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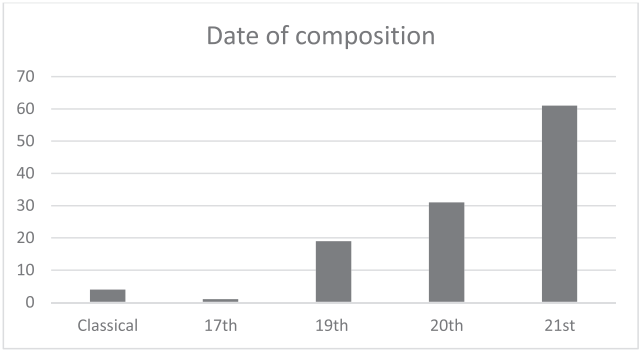


Figure 4: Publication dates of teacher-suggested texts.

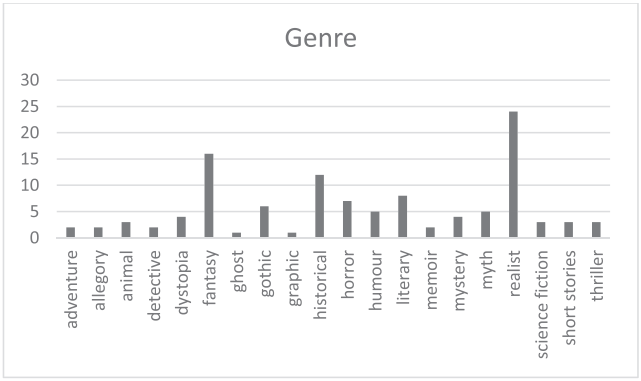


Figure 5: The genres of teacher-suggested texts.

preparation for GCSE, to maximise students' enjoyment and broaden their reading:

> *We're trying to get books which cover a range of perspectives, people from different cultures and that consider BAME as well.* (School B)

One school explicitly sets out to build challenge and broaden experience from Years 7 to 9 by reading Treasure Island, To Kill a Mockingbird and The Great Gatsby. There is a perception that "older, more old-fashioned" texts are inherently more challenging, and this leads to a dilemma when teachers want to refresh the curriculum with newer material. One teacher commented of a recent YA (young adult) novel:

> *[It] is quite good and they quite enjoy it but … you very quickly realise this does not really work as a book to be taught so I think that's the problem.* (School A)

The distinction between books which are enjoyable to read and those which provide challenge for students suggests that challenge is found in canonical texts, with all that implies about cultural values (Nelson-Addy et al., 2018; Peel, 2017). This raises important questions about teacher agency in extending the reading experience of students and providing challenge through carefully designed activities (Simpson, 2017).

Poetry

The poetry choices presented in the initial question on the survey resonated with the schools, and the data show the consistent popularity of these poems across KS3 (Table 5).

The most popular poem was easily Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*, and only this and Heaney's *Blackberry Picking* are from the 20th century. All the most popular poems are written by men, and female protagonists (when they appear) are either victims (*The Lady of Shalott* and *The Highwayman*) or dangerous to men (*La Belle Dame sans Merci*).

Greater diversity was evident in the teacher-suggested poetry choices. Approximately 65 individual poets are mentioned and 100 different poems. The influence of examination board anthologies is clear with several poems by Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage and the poets featured in the "Different Cultures" section of the early 2000s AQA Anthology[4] continue to be popular, for example, John Agard, Grace Nichols and Imitiaz Dharker. More

[4]AQA Anthologies – AQA is an awarding body for examinations, and in the early 2000, its literature examination involved the study of an anthology of prose and poetry which included a section entitled "Poetry from Different Cultures".

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Table 5: Popular poems taught in Years 7, 8 and 9

	Year 7	*Year 8*	*Year 9*	*Total*	*Whole text*	*Extracts*	*No. weeks mean*	*No. weeks mode*
Beowulf	17	4	2	**23**	3	14	3.6	6
Blackberry Picking (Heaney)	2	1	0	**3**	2	0	1.5	1.5
Canterbury Tales (Chaucer)	13	6	2	**21**	1	17	4.4	6
Dulce et Decorum est (Owen)	8	24	38	**70**	55	1	1.8	1
Jabberwocky (Carroll)	11	1	0	**12**	9	1	1.85	1
La Belle Dame sans Merci (Keats)	0	1	1	**2**	2	0	2	2
The Eagle (Tennyson)	10	3	1	**14**	11	1	1	1
The Highwayman (Noyes)	11	2	1	**14**	11	1	2.5	1
The Lady of Shalott (Tennyson)	8	4	2	**14**	10	1	2.6	1
The Raven (Poe)	9	12	8	**29**	21	2	1.4	1
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (Coleridge)	2	7	3	**12**	5	4	2.7	2
The Tyger (Blake)	14	7	3	**24**	18	0	1.9	1
Totals	**105**	**72**	**61**		**148**	**42**		

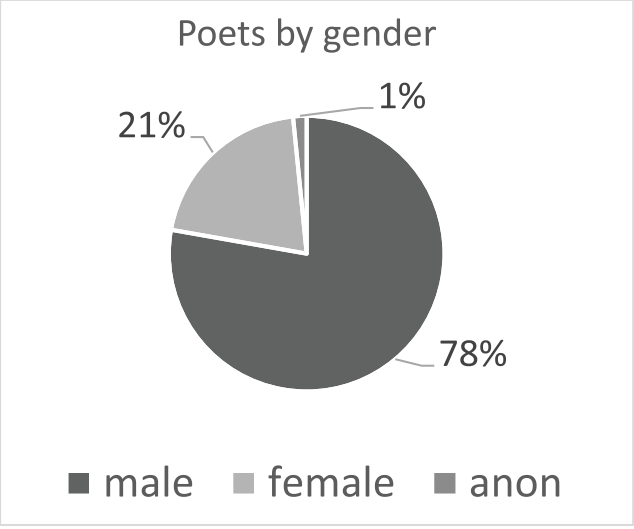


Figure 6: Poets by gender (both commonly-used and teacher-suggested poems).

women feature in the teacher-suggested poems, although men still dominate (Figure 6).

While the teacher-suggested poems feature 20th and 21st century texts, most are 19th century or earlier (Figure 7). Teacher-suggested poetry is also dominated by poets from the United Kingdom with a few American poets, often those featured in past GCSE anthologies (Figure 8). However, a simple analysis by nationality does not accurately represent the complexity of some poets' identities, often a significant element in their work (Figure 9).

Some more recent works, such as Warsan Shire's *Home*, Kala Farnham's *White Flag* or Dave Kirby's *The Justice Bell*, respond to contemporary events or issues: the experience of refugees, violence against women and Hillsborough respectively.[5] Although such examples are rare, they are evidence of teachers exploring beyond the established canon.

The interview data demonstrate that many teachers see poetry as a means of developing a range of skills and knowledge. One approach is to develop a unit of work including a novel and poetry (sometimes a single poem) as a counterpoint; for example, Charles Bukowski's *The Suicide Kid* taught in conjunction with

[5]The Hillsborough disaster was a crush of overcrowded football supporters at a match in Sheffield, England, in 1989. It resulted in the deaths of 97 people.

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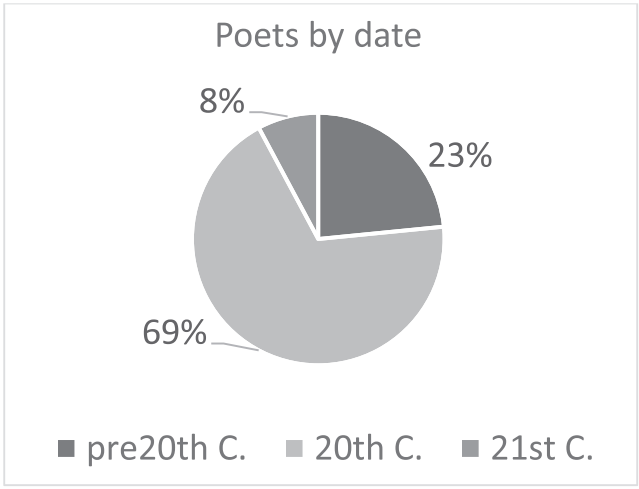


Figure 7: Poets by century (both commonly-used and teacher-suggested poems).

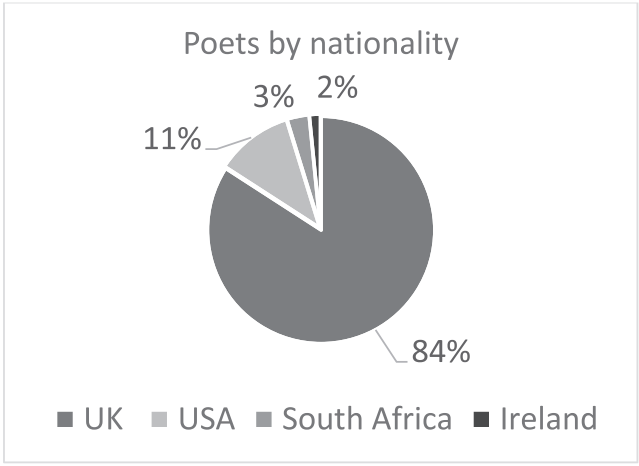


Figure 8: Poets by nationality (both commonly-used and teacher-suggested poems).

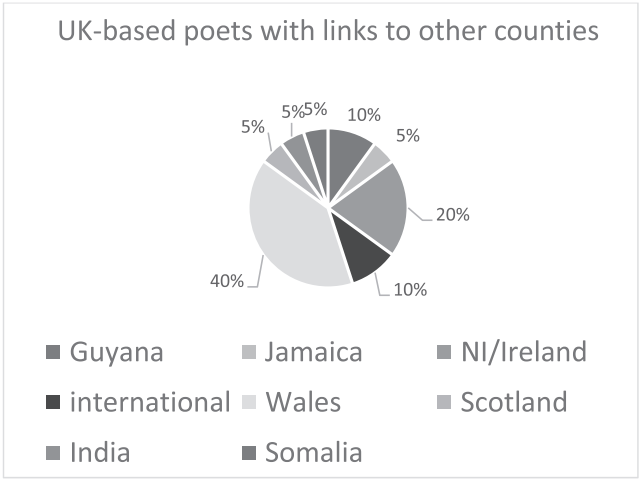


Figure 9: UK poets' links to other countries (both commonly-used and teacher-suggested poems).

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Table 6: Top ranking drama texts taught in Year 7

Year 7						
Rank	*Freq*	*Title*	*Author*	*Year*	*Author*	*Protag*
1	36	MND	Shakespeare	1595–96	M	F/M
2	25	The Tempest	Shakespeare	1611	M	M
3=	12	Macbeth	Shakespeare	1606	M	M
3=	12	Romeo and Juliet	Shakespeare	1595–96	M	F/M
5	10	Frankenstein (adapted)	Pullman	1990	M	M
6	6	Much Ado About Nothing	Shakespeare	1598–99	M	F/M
7	4	Dracula (adapted)	Calcutt	2003	M	M
8=	2	Hamlet	Shakespeare	1599–1601	M	M
8=	2	Julius Caesar	Shakespeare	1599	M	M
8=	2	Merchant of Venice	Shakespeare	1597	M	F/M
8=	2	Richard III	Shakespeare	1592	M	M

The Great Gatsby in Year 9 to develop contextual understanding of alcohol abuse. The limitations of this approach are also recognised by schools:

> *they almost seem like … a bolt-on because we need to cover poetry at some point.* (School E)

Challenge is also a factor in schools' poetry choices. A school using Blake's *London* as part of a unit on protest makes it explicit to learners that:

> *this is an A Level*[6] *standard text that you are doing in Year 9.* (School A)

One school uses a unit of work on war poetry including *Dulce et Decorum Est* to develop skills for GCSE English Language:

> *I wanted to do an incorporation of language, obviously Language Paper 1 skills … I wanted it to fit in with the idea of conflict, but we started off with propaganda posters and recruitment poetry.* (School C)

For some schools, poetry is their focus for broadening the diversity of pupils' experience of literature:

> *[with] poetry in particular we have tried to get more of a representation of people from different cultures, different backgrounds, different ethnicities …* (School B)

Schools may take their lead from the AQA Anthologies of the early 2000s but also include other material such as Warsan Shire's Home, chosen because it is 'powerful', 'very relevant' and "I thought it would really get them thinking" (School B). At the same time, some schools acknowledge that teaching poetry can present problems and that there is lack of poetry in their schemes of work:

> *poetry … remains my least favourite thing to teach. Because it's always met with negativity and I feel like you are always off on a negative for the poetry.* (School G)

Drama

Shakespeare dominates the choice of drama texts. In Year 7 (Table 6), the top 10 texts are almost exclusively Shakespearean with the only other plays regularly studied being adaptations of 19th century novels. Given that the study of a play by Shakespeare is a curriculum requirement, this is not surprising, but it is interesting to note the variety being studied in Year 7.

A similar pattern appears in Year 8 (Table 7) but with the addition of another adaptation, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* – the first and only example of a 21st century play – while *Our Day Out*, written in 1977, seems dated in comparison.

There is greater variety in the Year 9 curriculum (Table 8) with a similar choice of Shakespeare, supplemented by some 19th and 20th century plays.

The 19th and 20th century texts in this list are current or recent GCSE texts. *A View from the Bridge* and *The Crucible*, in common with some of the novels discussed earlier, are no longer permitted at GCSE in England, but it seems that teachers value them enough to include them in the KS3 curriculum. The dominance of GCSE texts in this group suggests that the teaching of play scripts at this level is seen explicitly as preparation for the examination.

[6]A levels are externally examined qualifications, taken by pupils aged 17–18.

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Table 7: Top ranking drama texts taught in Year 8

Year 8						
Rank	*Freq*	*Title*	*Author*	*Year*	*Author*	*Protag*
1	18	Macbeth	Shakespeare	1606	M	M
2	16	Romeo and Juliet	Shakespeare	1595–96	M	F/M
3	14	The Tempest	Shakespeare	1611	M	M
4=	11	A Midsummer Night's Dream	Shakespeare	1592	M	F/M
4=	11	Much Ado About Nothing	Shakespeare	1598–99	M	F/M
6	7	Frankenstein (adapted)	Pullman	1990	M	M
7=	5	Dracula (adapted)	Calcutt	2003	M	M
7=	5	Our Day Out	Russell	1977	M	F/M
9	4	Twelfth Night	Shakespeare	1601	M	F
10	3	The Curious Incident … (adapted)	Stephens	2013	M	M

Table 8: Top ranking drama texts taught in Year 9

Year 9						
Rank	*Freq*	*Title*	*Author*	*Year*	*Author*	*Protag*
1	38	Romeo and Juliet	Shakespeare	1595–96	M	F/M
2	28	Macbeth	Shakespeare	1606	M	M
3	11	An Inspector Calls	Priestley	1945	M	M
4	8	Much Ado About Nothing	Shakespeare	1598–99	M	F/M
5	7	The Tempest	Shakespeare	1611	M	M
6	5	Our Day Out	Russell	1977	M	F/M
7=	3	Dracula (adapted)	Calcutt	2003	M	M
7=	3	Blood Brothers	Russell	1985	M	M
9=	2	A View from the Bridge	Miller	1955	M	M
9=	2	The Crucible	Miller	1953	M	M
9=	2	Hamlet	Shakespeare	1600	M	M
9=	2	Importance/Being Earnest	Wilde	1895	M	M
9=	2	Journey's End	Sherriff	1928	M	M
9=	2	Julius Caesar	Shakespeare	1599	M	M
9=	2	Merchant of Venice	Shakespeare	1597	M	F/M
9=	2	Richard III	Shakespeare	1592	M	M

Data from the interviews suggest that teachers are enthusiastic about the inclusion of Shakespeare; some go beyond the basic curriculum requirements and others, who do not teach Shakespeare in a particular year, regret the omission:

> *I'd like to do more Shakespeare in Key Stage 3, if I'm completely honest.* (School A)

In addition to its position in the curriculum, it seems that for some schools, the teaching of Shakespeare in KS3 is part of the preparation for GCSE, with a consciousness of the challenges inherent in the plays:

> *So in Year 9 we have got Romeo and Juliet, with a focus on tragedy … this is where we are starting to build the ideas that they'll need to have when they approach Macbeth [for GCSE].* (School C)

> *It gives them a nice chance in Year 9 to actually enjoy the plays and by the time they have got to Year 9, our idea is that they have already studied two, so they should be looking past the language barriers.* (School E)

Teachers are committed to teaching Shakespeare and enjoy enthusiastic responses from their pupils who embrace the challenge:

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I think they feel really grown up studying Shakespeare. (School D)

At the same time, schools are aware that the dominance of Shakespeare comes at a price:

I do think that we need some more modern texts just so that children do not feel like we are looking at classics … because there are some great modern plays. (School E)

In contrast to the survey responses on novels and poetry, respondents did not name additional plays taught. Other than plays by Shakespeare, the range is narrow with a total of 10 texts, including three adaptations of novels. The range of dramatists is even narrower as both Willy Russell and Arthur Miller appear twice. Only one play in the list, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, was written in the 21st century, and other plays referred to by some teachers as 'modern', such as *Blood Brothers*, were written over 30 years ago. The narrow range is both a surprise and a concern.

Influences on the organisation of the teaching

Teachers make many decisions about how to organise the teaching of a literature text. Here, we refer to three areas we consider significant:

1 whether a text is taught as a whole or through extracts;
2 the time allocated to the text;
3 the influence of assessment.

Just over three quarters of the prose/novels recorded in the survey were taught by reading the whole text (Figure 10). Indeed, some teachers feel strongly about teaching whole texts:

I think that's really tragic not to finish a set text. (School D)

… regardless of the novel in Years 7, 8 and 9 we always read the whole thing (School B)

However, extracts are favoured in particular circumstances such as teaching from anthologies or short story collections (e.g. Sherlock Holmes stories), from literary non-fiction (e.g. *The Diary of Anne Frank*), as well as from longer texts, such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or pre-20th century texts such as *Oliver Twist*.

Poetry is mainly taught through studying whole texts (Figure 10); texts that are most likely to be taught through extracts are longer works, including *The Canterbury Tales* (94%), *Beowulf* (82%) and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (44%).

Plays are often taught through extracts, with nearly 50% being taught in this way (Figure 10). Twentieth and 21st century texts (e.g. *Our Day Out* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*) are more likely to be studied as whole texts. All of the commonly taught Shakespeare texts, however, are frequently taught through extracts.

There appear to be a number of reasons as to why extracts are studied. One is time, and another is maintaining engagement. Asked about why her department taught *Romeo and Juliet* through extracts, one teacher explained:

Just because we wanted them not to be put off … Just to engage with it and explore it but not be overwhelmed. (School D)

Some responses indicate a recent shift to teaching extracts, prompted by examination demands or by

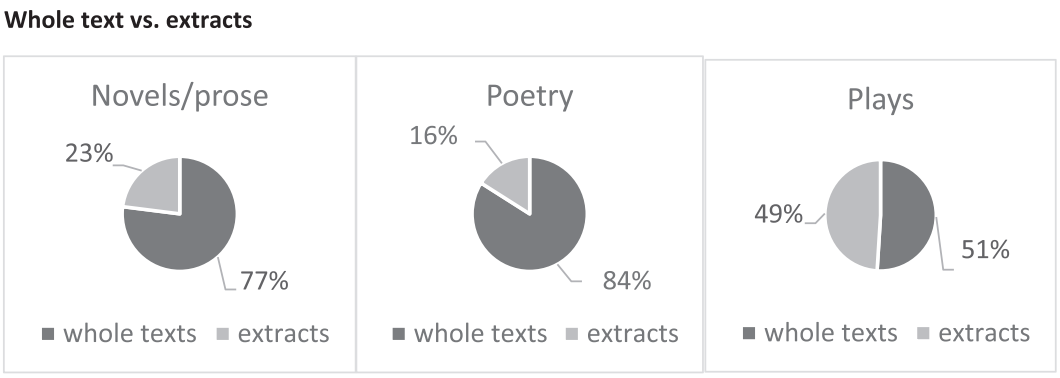


Figure 10: The percentage of texts taught as a whole or through extracts.

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current popular foci in English, for example, the 'vocabulary gap':

> *We have changed our teaching approach this year and have decided to teach a range of extracts from different literature texts with Years 8 and 9. We are trying to broaden students' vocabulary and the quality of what they are reading.* (survey response)

It is a shift in practice that has been noted elsewhere. In a survey of literature taught in upper secondary classes in Norway, Skaug and Blikstad-Balas (2019) found the majority of teachers using extracts. They note that such practice fails to provide students with a holistic experience of the texts and that this can affect interpretation and understanding. A similar concern has been noted with respect to the influence of extract-based questions in PARCC assessments in the United States (Peel, 2017). A teacher in our survey raised a further issue:

> *For a number of years I have voiced my concerns that relying so heavily on extract-based teaching for literature is detrimental to students' reading stamina. Unfortunately we are limited with resources (1 text between two at best, 1 photocopied booklet of key extracts between two at worst) due to budget cuts and increasing class sizes* (survey response)

If students are to gain the confidence, competence and satisfaction of working with whole texts, then the tendency to teach extracts is potentially detrimental to their development.

Time allocated to texts

The time allowed for studying texts will influence whether the text is taught as a whole or not. For the teachers in the study, the most common length of time spent studying a novel was 6 to 8 weeks, that is, a half term. Some schools opted to study texts for about a term (10 to 12 weeks), accounting for nearly 20% of the texts studied. There were exceptions, and in one case, the school made the novel the key text over the course of most of the year (24 weeks) and used other texts (poetry and plays) to complement the study.

Using the structure of the school year, rather than the length of a text, to dictate the length of study, led to frustrations for some teachers:

> *… I thought I really have not got time to do this … but I was thinking like there's no way we are not finishing this text.* (School C)

Poetry is generally taught in shorter periods of time than novels. Some poetry study is clearly guided by the 6-week structure noted above, particularly in Years 7 and 8, with units on specific themes (e.g. war poetry) or poets (e.g. Wordsworth). However, the majority is taught in 1 or 2-week blocks of time. This is especially the case for Year 9 where 85% of poetry study takes place over a period of 1 or 2 weeks, compared with 63% in Year 7 and 73% in Year 8. Less time is devoted to studying poetry in Year 9, and the poetry study takes place in shorter bursts of time as pupils progress through KS3.

In the case of plays, 6-week schemes of work still predominate, but there is more chance of a 10- or 12-week time allocation in Year 9. The predominance of 6-week units probably explains why Shakespeare plays are mostly taught through extracts. The structure of the school year, rather than the demands of the subject, is the main influence in the time allowed to study a novel or play.

The influence of GCSE assessment

The data suggest that GCSE is a strong influence on literature study in KS3. Some schools start formal GCSE study in Year 9 (to be examined in Year 10), but it is more common to introduce an element of GCSE in Year 9, usually set poetry. The appearance of GCSE set poetry was widespread in the poetry taught in Year 8 and 9 in particular, with pupils often studying GCSE themed poetry clusters, past and present.

There was concern about the pressure from GCSE on KS3 and Year 9:

> *… we are too quick to push GCSE style tasks on KS3 rather than consolidating skills* (survey response)

but a sense that it was impossible to avoid being drawn in

> *… there's a grab for grades. Your students need to be in position where they are able to go for the same grades as everybody else (School C).*

Some departments are consciously managing the demands made upon them:

> *I think everybody understands that the tail is wagging the dog to a certain extent with preparing them for the GCSE but at the same time I think we as a department strongly believe that KS3 is not a mini-GCSE in*

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> *any way, shape or form; that word 'preparing' is really important but it's not 'repeating'* (School F)

The evidence from this study is that Year 9 has been given over to GCSE already and GCSE exhibits strong influence in Years 7 and 8. Teachers recognise what is being lost under the pressure of assessment and accountability:

> *There is so much pressure to complete assessments to provide data on reading, writing and oracy skills that often the magic of reading a good book is pushed aside* (survey response)

This, of course, raises fundamental questions about the purpose of teaching literature at KS3 and what should be achieved through the teaching of literature in Years 7 and 8, if not Year 9.

Conclusion

This study provides a snapshot of the literature commonly taught at KS3 in over 170 schools. The results show that while many schools provide a lively, challenging and wide-ranging diet of literature for students in Years 7, 8 and 9, in a significant proportion of schools, it is more limited. Specifically, there is a worrying lack of diverse and contemporary voices. Few of the texts taught are by women writers or feature female protagonists; there are even fewer writers and characters of colour, despite evidence of a rise in diversity within children's literature (CLPE, 2020). What messages are schools giving young people about their place in the world if girls or young people from diverse backgrounds do not appear as significant characters? "If you do not see yourself, how do you know you belong?" (Benjamin, 2020). And what opportunities are we missing in helping young people shape an empathic view of the world, understanding people and cultures that are different from their own experiences (Skaug and Blikstad-Balas, 2019)?

Furthermore, we are potentially missing opportunities to support young people in engaging critically with their own cultural choices. Teachers noted that Ofsted's use of Bourdieu's term 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984; Ofsted, 2019) was an influence on curriculum planning and text choice. Parry (2014), writing before the publication of the current Ofsted Inspection Framework, uses the term to signify children and young people's own cultural capital, the knowledge and interests that they bring to class. Using Parry's definition, perhaps schools should engage more with popular media as well as the literary canon.

The study also reveals the tendency for texts to be taught in 6 weeks, regardless of length, and for certain texts to be taught as extracts. GCSE assessment also has a clear influence on text choices. Indeed, in many schools, KS3 is purely a preparation for GCSE, losing the sense that the early years of secondary school have a purpose of their own in terms of teaching literature. The impact of testing regimes starts well before GCSE, often influenced by international comparisons such as PISA (Moss, 2017; Peel, 2017). The threat to diversity is not only in the texts selected but also in an increasing homogeneity of teaching (Sigþórsson, 2017).

The fundamental changes to schooling brought about by blended and distance learning during the pandemic have caused schools to re-evaluate curriculum and pedagogy (EEF, 2021). At the same time, our awareness of the need for diversity in curriculum and pedagogy has grown (Webb, 2022). In this context, we hope this study provokes renewed reflection on the purpose of English literature in the early years of secondary school. Specifically, schools might consider their vision and aspirations for learning about and through literature for students aged 11–14 years, other than as a preparation for future examinations. Examining the 'diet' of literature offered to pupils across this age range would be a good place to start, considering, for example, whether a range of literature is experienced (in terms of novels, poetry and plays) and how diverse the literature is in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Essentially, we would urge English departments to engage in a dialogue about the teaching of literature to younger secondary school pupils. Our final report (available at: https://ukla.org/funded_projects/what-literature-texts-are-being-taught-in-years-7-to-9/) would be an interesting starting point for such a dialogue. An audit can also be downloaded from this link. The audit is designed primarily as a means to help departments capture a snapshot of the literature being taught and to initiate an important discussion on the teaching of literature at KS3.

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