



Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following:

Fernandes, A. (2026). English teachers' journeys since the 2020 iteration of Black Lives Matter. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.70232>

This Digest was prepared by [Adrian Fernandes](#).

English teachers' journeys after Black Lives Matter

What is this research about and why is it important?

Just 1.5% of GCSE English literature students study a text by a racially minoritised author, even though 38% of pupils in England are racially minoritised. The 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) led students to demand that their schools close this gap. I wanted to find out what actually happened next in English classrooms, and why change proved so hard to sustain.

My main finding was that BLM genuinely shifted how teachers thought and taught. But entrenched barriers, from resource gaps to institutional silencing, held that change back and kept the traditional, largely white literary canon in place.

What did I do?

I interviewed 11 secondary school English teachers in Southeast England in depth about their professional journeys between 2020 and 2024, deliberately including a higher proportion of racially minoritised teachers (four of the 11) than the national average, so that those most affected by these issues were well-represented in the study.

I asked each teacher to map their journey on a timeline, which helped them to recall and talk through how their teaching had changed over that period.

I read through the interviews closely and looked for patterns in how teachers described change, what helped them and what held them back.

As a racially minoritised former English teacher, I was both insider and outsider to the system I was studying. I kept a journal throughout to check my own assumptions and keep the focus on what teachers themselves made of their experiences.

What did I find?

Three key themes emerged:

1. Change: BLM acted as a genuine catalyst for change.

- All 11 teachers described a real shift in outlook after 2020, whether that meant white teachers examining their own privilege, or racially minoritised teachers feeling able to speed up changes that they had already wanted to make.
 - BLM made race-related conversations in the classroom more possible and made proposals to diversify text lists harder to resist.
 - Most teachers felt that this was a lasting change in direction not just a passing moment.
2. Opportunities: Four elements helped teachers to act on this new appetite for change.
- Students themselves pushed for change and felt more confident raising it after BLM.
 - Where teachers introduced texts by racially minoritised authors, students, including those from racially minoritised backgrounds, engaged with them enthusiastically.
 - Teaching racially minoritised students directly prompted some teachers to question why their reading lists did not reflect their classes.
 - Exam boards began offering more diverse set texts, giving teachers a practical route into enacting change.
3. Barriers: A resilient system contained the momentum for change.
- Resources for teaching these texts were scarce or simply did not exist. Teachers described picking texts based on “what’s in the book cupboard,” which was not a selection of texts by racially minoritised authors.
 - Teachers worried that some contemporary texts by racially minoritised authors would be seen as inappropriate for the classroom, and they faced pushback from some parents.
 - Discussing race felt risky. Teachers described fearing that they might cross a line, and some avoided the topic altogether rather than navigate it without training or support.
 - School responses were often performative: diversity statements and audits led nowhere, and in one case a teacher was threatened over raising the issue.
 - Racially minoritised and white teachers faced different but equally constraining pressures. The former were expected to act as unpaid diversity experts, whilst the latter had to grapple with their own discomfort.
 - Teacher training itself emerged as canon-centric, leaving teachers with little grounding in how to teach texts by racially minoritised authors, and almost no professional development filled that gap.
 - Even where change happened, texts by racially minoritised authors were often confined to short extracts, poems or non-fiction excerpts, whilst full novels remained overwhelmingly by white authors. This pattern let schools claim inclusivity without disturbing the core curriculum.

What does it all mean anyway?

The clearest implication is that goodwill and enthusiasm amongst teachers is not, on its own, enough to change what gets taught. BLM created real desire for change, but energised teachers were confronted with a system that was well-equipped to absorb pressure without fundamentally shifting. Canon-centric training, thin resourcing and cautious school leadership proved key parts of this system.

This led me to propose four interventions:

- embedding anti-racist training in initial teacher education;
- ring-fenced funding for inclusive resources;
- representation measures in Ofsted inspections;
- formal channels for student input into the curriculum.

These offer a concrete starting point for departments and training providers wanting to act on these findings rather than simply agree with them.

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