Transcript

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Welcome to Education Explored, the Department of Education at the University of Oxford podcast.

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We've launched this brand new series to explore all things education, from teaching to research to finding out why we're one of the leading departments in the country and the world.

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I'm your host, Heather Sherkunov, and for episode 4, I'm delighted to be joined by Professor Velda Elliott.

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Velda is a Professor in English and Education, as well as our Director for Graduate Studies, and has been at the department since 2014.

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Hi, Velda, thanks for speaking with me today.

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Hi, Heather.

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You work principally in the field of English L1 education, where your work looks at the ways in which we teach and assess literature and how books and society interact

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and you have a particular interest in questions of equity and representation and unsettling imperialist legacies in the English curriculum.

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This has led you to be the lead researcher for the Lit in Colour campaign.

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The initiative is a partnership with Penguin Random House and the Runnymede Trust to widen the racial diversity of texts and authors in the English classroom.

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Tell us about the project.

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Sure, so Lit in Colour is a campaign run by Penguin and the Runnymede Trust.

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and it came into being in 2020.

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And they've done the most amazing work.

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They make huge book donations to schools, they've worked with exam boards, they've run conferences with teachers, they've run conferences with students.

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It's been a really fantastic project to be involved in.

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And then I came on board again in 2020 as the research lead.

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And we started out by finding out what the baseline was that we were working from and

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At that point, we discovered that only 0.7% of students at GCSE were answering on a text by an author of colour.

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Oh, wow.

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Which is, it's minute.

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It's a really small number of people.

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Yeah.

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And what was even worse, there were only 0.1% studying a text by a woman of colour at that age.

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So we were looking at novels and plays in regards to this, what's called the modern text on the GCSE.

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And we've looked into why it was that the curriculum isn't very diverse and what was stopping people from diversifying their curriculum.

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And there were quite a few things that were going on.

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One of them is the perennial issue of money.

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You know, you use the books you've got in the cupboard, you can't buy more.

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Another one was about time for teachers to find the new books that they wanted to teach, to read them, to kind of get an idea.

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But also the subject knowledge.

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They mostly didn't know where to start when they were looking for those new books.

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And finally, the confidence to talk about issues of race in the classroom, because that can be quite controversial, it can be a very emotional topic, and particularly where you're talking about racism.

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So those were the kind of four main barriers.

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And I'm really pleased to say there's been a huge amount of interest in changing the curriculum and people have really come out, there's lots of publishers, lots of

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booksellers, lots of people have come out and come together to make recommendations, to really get information out there about which books are worth teaching, what you should be looking at, have you read this, have you seen this author, those kind of things.

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And in 2019, so before we started, Pearson and Excel had already announced they were diversifying which authors they had on their GCSE curriculum.

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And now all of the exam boards work in partnership with Lit in Colour.

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They've all changed their text lists on both GCSE and A-level to include more authors of colour and more diverse texts of all kinds actually.

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So there's a lot more out there to choose from.

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And the second piece of research that we did was working specifically with Pearson and Edexcel.

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I had a partnership with Lit in Colour to run what was called the Lit in Colour Pioneers Pilot.

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And this was a programme which supported

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teachers in schools to change their set text to one of the new set texts offered by Pearson Edexcel.

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And so they got a free class set of books of their chosen set text, they got access to training, they got access to resources, and we took the opportunity to do the first study in this country of what the effect is of learning a text by an author of colour in schools.

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There's a small amount of research from around the world which suggests that this is a good thing, that it helps in all sorts of areas.

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And so what we did was do some pre and post testing on attitudes with the students and the teachers involved.

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And we did a whole bunch of qualitative data analysis as well, interviewing schools, teachers, children.

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And there were some amazing results in that, essentially,

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Reading one of these texts, the kids really loved them.

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They go home far more engaged in English, they were more interested in going on to study it later on, and both teachers and students reported an increase in what we termed cognitive engagement in the classroom.

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So not what you might call the kind of classroom management aspect of engagement, not people just sitting there and listening and taking it in, but actually thinking.

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Their brains were engaged, they were making points, they were making connections between the texts

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which is really powerful and important.

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And we had some wonderful stories about like, so one of the books is Boys Don't Cry by Malorie Blackman.

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And we had these wonderful stories about kids from other year groups hearing about this book, wanting to read it, that it was, you know, you might be studying it in year 11, but your year 9 brother had borrowed it and was reading it.

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And there was just talk everywhere.

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You know, when they had that text, the kids were talking about their set text in the dining hall and in form rooms.

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And that's quite unusual.

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That's not a normal experience.

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So yes, the Lit and Colour Pioneers pilot found some really good impacts from studying a text by an author of colour.

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And we are kind of continuing to push on that work to see where we get to next.

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So is that classrooms across the UK that research has been looking at, or is it specific areas?

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It's classrooms in England.

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The exams that we sit in school are very different in different countries in the UK.

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So Wales has got a more diverse curriculum now, but Pearson, Edexcel, AQA, OCR and Educast, which is the branch of the Welsh board that is available to English schools, they've all changed their set text.

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There's been some work in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but not to the same scale.

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And have you got any updated stats on...

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I do.

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So we had the brilliant thing about the Link Colour Pioneers pilot was that by 2024, that had increased the number of students answering on a text by an author of colour at GCSE to 1.5%.

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So it had more than doubled.

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And that was the efforts of a single exam board who have a relatively small market share.

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In the general, there's about half a million kids who take GCSE each year.

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So that was really good.

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That was an amazing increase.

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It's still only 1.5% and it took a lot of effort to get there.

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It took steady engagement.

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It took a lot of resources.

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And that's what we kind of have concluded is that this work doesn't, you know, evolution takes too long.

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We need kind of a real will behind and resources to make it happen.

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And what would that look like?

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I think that it was a missed opportunity in the curriculum assessment review.

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I would really have liked it to see it say, everyone has to study a text by an author of colour.

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And also actually, everyone has to study a text by a woman.

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So this isn't the focus of Lit in Colour, but we have the figures anyway.

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So in 2019, the last, the kind of the baseline data, a maximum of 6% of students

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studied a full-length text by a woman at GCSE.

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So that's including the 19th century text.

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So that would be like Mary Shelley or Charlotte Bronte or Jane Austen and the modern texts by authors of all races.

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So I think that's something else which needs legislation, putting it in the rules, the regulations, makes it happen.

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It'll make it compulsory.

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Otherwise, it just needs resources and constant attention.

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So probably this sounds like an obvious question, but why is this so important?

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I think it's really important for a variety of reasons, but one of the things that, if you're a kid, if you're anybody actually, and you read, it's very easy to think that protagonists are always white males who are straight and middle class.

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And

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That's great if that's you and you always identify with it.

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But actually it's really important for children to see everybody getting a turn at being the protagonist and able-bodied as well.

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That's another really major thing.

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And it's particularly important, I think, for middle-class white boys to see that other people can be the protagonists as well.

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Because it's one of the things we learn about the way we interact with the world

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And if you think that you're the main character, then it makes you less receptive, responsive, less caring of other people.

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If you see that everybody is the main character in their own story, then it encourages empathy, it encourages better, what's called pro-social behaviours, so working towards a better society.

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And I think that that's something that we could really use right now.

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That's really interesting, I suppose

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I'd not thought of that side of it as well.

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You tend to think of it from the side of you're not someone who's being represented in the literature and what that impact might be.

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But I think that's really interesting

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The other side of it, that if you do think you're the main character, that would be a subconscious thing, potentially.

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Yeah, I mean, I think it's really important that we read a whole range of things.

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And the other thing is that this doesn't mean, because the argument is often put in, oh, you want to do this, you want to get rid of Shakespeare, you want to get rid of classics.

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And we absolutely don't.

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I'm an English literature specialist.

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I love Shakespeare.

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I love the like...

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I grew up on the Brontes.

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What I think is really important is having the better knowledge of those texts and knowing that actually, you know, 19th century novels written in England, in London at the hub of the empire, those were not all white

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situations that they were in.

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They had people, they had food, they had all sorts of things coming and going from all corners of the world at that time.

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And if you think about things like Great Expectations, which I did for GCSE, there's no plot if you don't have Empire because Magwitch goes to Australia, so he's transported to Australia as a criminal.

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He makes an enormous fortune there, exploiting the resources and is then able to make Pip,

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make Pip into a gentleman.

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So there's all sorts of things where I think it's really important for us to kind of understand better our society, where things came from.

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This isn't, like multicultural isn't something that suddenly arrived in the late 20th century.

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This is something which has been a part of British society for centuries and is really important in the way that our culture and our kind of like our diet, our literature has been created.

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What will be the future of that initiative?

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Are you still going to be involved moving forward?

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So we've just launched Canon in Colour, which is a set of resources designed to help you teach 19th century literature in the context of race and empire.

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And we've done two sets of resources, one for the most popular text, which is A Christmas Carol, which is also taught widely across Key Stage 3.

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So I imagine that most people who go to school do A Christmas Carol at some point.

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And we've also done resources for A Study in Scarlet, which is the Sherlock Holmes novella, which is on the syllabus right now.

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And we're hoping to follow that up with Jekyll and Hyde and Frankenstein.

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And that will cover the four most popular 19th century texts, which is the vast majority of GCSE.

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And we are, watch this space, about to release another Lit in Colour report, which will be the five-year kind of review about how things are going.

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And we'll have some updated statistics, which I cannot reveal yet.

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Well, we'll wait with bated breath for those then.

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So how can schools support teachers in confidently and thoughtfully talking about race and empire in literature?

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Because like you say, it can be a very sensitive topic.

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It can be a very sensitive topic.

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And I think it's really important for schools to, for one thing, support their teachers of colour, because it is often them who are challenged by parents and children for raising these issues.

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It is also really helpful to do rehearsals.

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So there's a kind of technique where you rehearse what might come up in the classroom and you kind of figure out how you would respond.

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So if someone uses a racial slur, what would you do?

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How would you respond?

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If somebody talked to you about something, what would you kind of talk through that?

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And I think that it's that kind of preparation where you kind of work through what might happen can be really reassuring for teachers to kind of go, actually, I've got this, I know what I'm doing.

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And having the facts is a really important thing, which I think is why the Canon in Colour stuff is so important.

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Because if you have factual information at your fingertips, it challenges

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anything that might be said out of prejudice or out of kind of misguided beliefs, things that are coming through from the media now.

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So, if you can talk specifically about the fact, well, this did come from India, this spice comes from India and is in this book, that's a factual thing about the way the empire and cultures were mixed in and there's not something that you can be that can be open to challenge.

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So I think that can be a really helpful technique as well.

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I'm just still blown away by those stats.

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I can't believe that in 2026, as we now are, that those are the sort of stats we're talking about.

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I mean, it's minute.

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It's shocking.

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The most, so the issue is that about 3/4 of all students study An Inspector Calls, which is a great play.

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And it has lots, I mean, it's about race.

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It's got lots of stuff going on for it.

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But you stick with that, and teachers are in a huge pressure cooker.

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They're supposed to be getting their results.

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And we do, I mean, I do understand why it's so difficult to change because you know you can get results, you know there's a whole bunch of resources out there and you know this text really, really well.

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And that's

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That's why it's safer to stick with that.

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And there's also pressures because lots now schools are organised in, lots of schools are organised in multi-academy trusts and they're quite often centralised curriculum.

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So there'll be an order that comes down from head office that says, you're going to do these texts and so you have to do what you've been told to teach.

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So I think there's a bit of risk aversion there.

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And again, we're about to go through a set of

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reforms of GCSEs due to the curriculum assessment review.

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And although they haven't, what they've said is that the structure of the GCSE English literature should stay the same, I think there's an opportunity here for, example, to do something brave and for schools to kind of go, actually, we could do something a bit different here.

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So when will those reforms be happening?

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So they're about to start writing the curriculum and that will take the next couple of years.

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And once the curriculum is written, then the exam boards get to go away and make up their GCSEs and they get to be approved by Ofqual.

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So it's a process of probably about five years before we get started on the new specifications.

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Yeah, it takes a while.

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So who do you need to get on board to change this curriculum ultimately?

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So there's two places that it could really happen.

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One is if there's political will, the DFE publishes what the content has to be for GCSE.

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And that's a kind of high level stuff.

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So at the moment it says a Shakespeare play, a 19th century novel, representative romantic poetry and a novel or play from the modern British era.

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So what they could do is say in that, there has to be a requirement for somebody to study a full length text by a person of colour and by a woman.

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What they could also do is to make it so that the modern text comes a lot later.

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So at the moment it's anything from 1914.

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So they could require say something from 1980 onwards,

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still basically 50 years.

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Or even in some of the A-levels when for poetry post-2000, so something that's like really modern and up to date, something from the last 20 years.

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And that's one place.

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The other place is for the exam boards to do this.

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And one of the issues there is, of course, that they are about making sure that they retain their market share, they're about making themselves appealing to schools.

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So it's quite risky for them to take off

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the most popular text.

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But I think what could be really beneficial is if when they are writing their new syllabuses, their new specifications, they make sure that the advisors that they employ are people who have knowledge and understanding of what makes a good text by an author of colour, which of these is going to deal with these kinds of issues in a really kind of appropriate way for the secondary classroom?

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What role do you think student voices have in shaping curriculum reform then?

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I think student voices are really important and parent voice actually.

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And students should be asking for what they want in their literature lessons.

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And this is something that can come really in place earlier than GCSE.

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Obviously, GCSE, there's a list of set texts they have to choose from.

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There's not really a lot of options.

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But if you're coming in and you're as a parent or as a child and talking to your English department and saying,

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I would like to study something contemporary.

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I would like to study something which reflects multicultural Britain.

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And one of the stats that we have from Lit in Colour means that we know that about 75% of all young people think the curriculum should reflect the diversity of modern British society.

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So go and tell your teachers that.

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Get your parents to tell your teachers that.

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Because ultimately, you know, that's where change comes from, is from this kind of overwhelming set of voices calling for it.

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How can research better bridge the gap between academic insights and then classroom practice?

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That's a really interesting question because from my point of view, there's not very much, the kind of research I do is very much based in being useful to teachers.

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And I think that's something that

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is really important to me.

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So I was an English teacher, I work in the teacher education programmes.

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Something that is always really important to me is that my research should be available to teachers and written in such a way that they can access it without having to jog through lots and lots of academic jargon.

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But also I think it's about doing kinds of research that are about the issues that people care about.

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And so for example, my most recent publication is about

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whether or not we should speak the N word in lessons.

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And ultimately, like the conclusion that I come to is, like, no.

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But I think it's really, a normal kind of academic article would be hedging, or some people say this, some people say that.

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And actually, I was like, in fact, in this case, I think you have to come to, you have to give some advice.

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And it's quite rare for academic articles to be that straightforward.

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And I think that that's something that is useful to think about.

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And in this case, it was quite clear cut because what the data said was, we all know that there's a risk of damage to children of colour.

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If you say the N word, it has a lot of baggage behind it.

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Everyone agrees we need to unpack that word, why we can't say it, why it's not used.

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But you can do that without speaking it out, without reading it out loud when you come across it in a text.

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And then there's also other questions about whether we should just be changing the text we're teaching altogether.

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But there's lots of more complicated stuff, but it's about that kind of, you can make a recommendation, you can make an actual kind of research-backed suggestion for practice.

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And is that something you enjoy about your research, that it is so impactful straight away in classroom practice and can be?

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Yes, absolutely.

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It's

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Lit in Colour is probably, it was an absolute gift.

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I was so lucky.

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So I was already working in this area, I was collecting some data and the Lit in Colour group came to me and said, would you be able to do this research with us?

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And this has been the most impactful research I've ever been involved with and it is wonderful to see how it impacts people.

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It's wonderful to have people kind of go, oh, we've changed because of this, we've done this

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because I think it's something that is really important.

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I really believe in it and it's really refreshing.

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I started out life as a medieval Celticist and I kind of went, there's no impact from this.

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And after that I became an English teacher and I came to do a DPhil in Education here at the Department.

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So I was here from 2007 to 2011 before I came back as an academic.

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And

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And I was like, this is going to be it.

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This is going to be impactful.

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It's going to be great.

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I'm going to make changes.

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And then I did my DPhil and I was like, yeah, no, mostly, mostly this doesn't make changes.

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So I think it's really, it's really exciting to be part of something when something, when you have a piece of research which really speaks to need and which, which connects with the people who are potentially going to use it.

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It's very exciting and it's completely what keeps us going.

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I was going to ask why this research is important now, but it seems to me it's important for 50 years and is maybe behind its time.

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I mean, it has been important for 50 years.

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And actually, what's interesting is that we are not the first people to be saying this.

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So the 1970s were fantastic.

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LATE, which is the London Association for Teaching English, had some great stuff that was going on for decades.

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and Harold Rosen spoke about this, who is kind of one of the godfathers of English education research.

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The English Media Centre in London have been doing stuff about this for years.

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And I think that partly, well, one of the most exciting things about this actually, and kind of the lesson that I've learned is that

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Penguin, as part of the Lit in Colour campaign, are so good at knowing how to target communication.

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And so the kind of the illustration, the social media assets, as I believe they're called, they have been really important in conveying the research and getting its impact out there, getting people to listen to it and see it and then start engaging with it.

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And that's one of the lessons that I've kind of really learned.

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I think that there has been stuff,

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this has been important for decades.

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There have been good people working on it for decades.

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And I think that we had, there was a moment in time in 2020 where it became really urgent and Penguin brought their not inconsiderable expertise to bear on that in terms of the communication and the Runnymede Trust brought the race expertise.

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And it's still important now, but

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What's important is sustaining it.

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So there were quite a few things that changed after 2020, after Black Lives Matter, after the protests.

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But a lot of that hasn't been sustained.

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So things changed, but there's a possibility if you don't keep your eye on it, it goes back.

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And that's kind of what's happened.

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It's been a cycle over years and years and years.

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And I think that it would be foolish to think that we're actually kind of like that this won't go back again.

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I think we need to keep the foot on the gas pedal.

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And presumably because it takes so long to do the curriculum reform bit, you really do need that steady impact.

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Yes, and it can always be lost at the moment.

00:23:46 Speaker 2

I mean, we went in 2010, we had an announcement of curriculum reform 2015, those specs were first taught for first examination in 2017.

00:23:57 Speaker 2

And they created a very different version of English literature to what had been taught in schools previously to that.

00:24:06 Speaker 1

In a good or bad way?

00:24:09 Speaker 2

Frankly, in a not a great way, OK, because...

00:24:13 Speaker 2

it focused to it became a much more historicised subject.

00:24:17 Speaker 2

It became a subject that was much more concerned with historical context and the classics.

00:24:22 Speaker 2

It became a much more instant subject.

00:24:24 Speaker 2

Previously we'd had a lot of kind of outward looking, we'd had lots of world texts potentially on the curriculum, and this became very British focused, which was less cosmopolitan, I suppose.

00:24:36 Speaker 2

And we do have great literature, but there's great literature everywhere.

00:24:39 Speaker 2

And I think that, I mean, there are other things at play that have meant that

00:24:42 Speaker 2

English in the last few years has become much less fun for students and therefore they don't, if you don't enjoy it, you're not going to go and read more at home, you're not going to go and do English A-level, you're not going to do an English degree, you're not going to become an English teacher.

00:24:59 Speaker 2

So there's kind of, there's a real major knock-on effect here that actually enjoying English is really important for succeeding in life.

00:25:07 Speaker 1

2026 is the National Year of Reading and this is an initiative which is being run by the Department for Education, not to be confused with us.

00:25:16 Speaker 1

It looks to tackle the decline in reading enjoyment, so just what you're talking about, in the UK which of course is connected to your research.

00:25:23 Speaker 1

Tell us a little bit more about that.

00:25:25 Speaker 2

So one of the things we know from all sorts of sources is that reading for pleasure is the kind of number one predictor of success in life of all sorts of measures, like both socioeconomic success, but also general happiness.

00:25:38 Speaker 2

And kids are not reading for pleasure.

00:25:41 Speaker 2

They are reading instrumentally.

00:25:42 Speaker 2

And this is particularly true of kids who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

00:25:47 Speaker 2

that they see, and this is partly what they've been told in schools, reading is essential for success.

00:25:53 Speaker 2

And so they read, they read, but they read instrumentally, not because they're enjoying it, not because they're loving it.

00:25:58 Speaker 2

And I think this is...

00:25:59 Speaker 2

One of the things here is that we've shown that these books, these texts by authors of colour, which tend to be contemporary, they tend to be about Britain, they tend to be about modern lives, they tend to be about the kinds of issues that kids are interested in, they enjoy reading them and they connect with them.

00:26:14 Speaker 2

There was a wonderful, in the first Lit and Colour report, I talked to a librarian from Birmingham who talked about Nikesh Shukla's The Boxer, and she's like, I just can't keep it on the shelf.

00:26:22 Speaker 2

And basically every single boy from year 8 to year 10 had read this book and they loved it because it was kind of, it was about their own ambitions, it was

00:26:29 Speaker 2

a kid like them, they absolutely adored it.

00:26:33 Speaker 2

So I think that that's one of the things you can do is think about what do kids want to read, give them the opportunity to read what they want to read.

00:26:40 Speaker 2

And that's something, again, which has been shown by research is that choice is really important for getting kids to enjoy reading.

00:26:48 Speaker 2

And I have two small children, one of whom is 8 and reads everything in sight.

00:26:53 Speaker 2

And I think it's really important to allow them to read

00:26:59 Speaker 2

wherever they want to read.

00:27:00 Speaker 2

Graphic novels, still reading.

00:27:02 Speaker 2

And in fact, I saw a wonderful statistic the other day, which is about graphic novels having more complex vocabulary and the more kind of difficult words, if you like, than an adult would normally use in their everyday speaking life.

00:27:14 Speaker 2

And so they use unusual vocabulary.

00:27:16 Speaker 2

Those words are in there.

00:27:18 Speaker 2

And they're also getting a picture to help them understand and getting the pragmatics there.

00:27:23 Speaker 2

It's all about reading.

00:27:24 Speaker 2

It's great.

00:27:24 Speaker 2

They need to do it.

00:27:25 Speaker 2

They should be reading anything they want to get their hands on.

00:27:28 Speaker 1

So we're supporting the campaign as a department.

00:27:30 Speaker 1

What are some of the things we'll be doing?

00:27:32 Speaker 2

We have a wonderful task that we set our PGCE English students every year, our beginning English teachers, where they have to read and review a young adult novel by what we call own voices.

00:27:45 Speaker 2

So someone who is writing as an author of colour about character colour or queerness or disability or all of those kinds, any kind of like non-majority characteristic.

00:27:58 Speaker 2

And those books, so they read a book from the last couple of years, then they review it and those reviews are shared across the partnership with all our local schools, with our mentors, they get to see what people are reading, they get to see what's new and out there.

00:28:10 Speaker 2

And we've got a few of our students are going to be talking about their books on our Instagram later in the year, which is very exciting.

00:28:17 Speaker 2

And we have already spread those reviews across the partnership and shared

00:28:22 Speaker 2

up-to-date reading recommendations.

00:28:24 Speaker 1

And what else will we be doing as part of the initiative?

00:28:27 Speaker 2

Later on this year we are hoping to have some of our research that's conducted by our students, so people who are practicing teachers on our masters in learning and teaching, who have done some research on reading for pleasure and they're going to come and talk about their research and what they've found out in their schools with their pupils.

00:28:44 Speaker 1

Great, so the message is get reading anything.

00:28:47 Speaker 2

Anything at all.

00:28:48 Speaker 2

Anything at all.

00:28:49 Speaker 2

Pick up a book.

00:28:50 Speaker 2

I have, that's my resolution this year.

00:28:52 Speaker 2

I was like, I normally, I've read a lot of children's books over the last few years.

00:28:56 Speaker 2

I've read a lot of academic books.

00:28:57 Speaker 2

I've not read a lot for pleasure.

00:28:59 Speaker 2

And that was my resolution for this year, was to concentrate on reading for pleasure.

00:29:01 Speaker 2

And I have read absolutely cracking novels so far this month.

00:29:05 Speaker 2

So murder mysteries, fantasies, contemporary Britain, classics, whatever it is, get on it, enjoy it.

00:29:13 Speaker 1

So have you got any book recommendations that you would give to people?

00:29:16 Speaker 2

I've got absolutely loads.

00:29:17 Speaker 2

So kind of starting out in the picture book range for kind of five-year-olds, which is my youngest child, he has been absolutely obsessed with Faruq and the Wiri Wiri.

00:29:26 Speaker 2

It's about a boy learning to cook with the Wiri Wiri berries, which are quite spicy.

00:29:31 Speaker 2

And it's just, it's lovely.

00:29:32 Speaker 2

It's such a nice...

00:29:34 Speaker 2

It's a celebration of food, a celebration of cooking, and the idea that you can do whatever you want.

00:29:38 Speaker 2

It's a fantastic book.

00:29:39 Speaker 2

And as I say, we had to read it like every single night for two weeks, which is in five-year-old terms, the ultimate accolade.

00:29:45 Speaker 2

If you have got kids, I would recommend anything that has been illustrated by Dapo Adeola.

00:29:51 Speaker 2

It's like he's my mark of approval.

00:29:54 Speaker 2

If he's illustrated it, must be a good thing.

00:29:56 Speaker 2

He's collaborated with Malorie Blackman on a picture book or two.

00:29:59 Speaker 2

He's got his own picture book out, which is Super Goat Girl.

00:30:03 Speaker 2

And he's,

00:30:04 Speaker 2

he's also illustrated some really good kind of middle grade books called Space Detectives.

00:30:09 Speaker 2

Love him, love him to bits.

00:30:11 Speaker 2

And I think my favourite read of the last couple of years, and which for a young adult audience, kind of 15 plus I would say, is a book called Murder on a School Night by Kate Weston.

00:30:21 Speaker 2

And it's a period positive murder mystery in which one of the murders is committed with a menstrual cup.

00:30:29 Speaker 2

And the police are like, it's an accident.

00:30:31 Speaker 2

They must have just been doing shots from it.

00:30:33 Speaker 2

And our teenage heroines are like, no, this is murder.

00:30:36 Speaker 2

There is no way that anyone is putting a menstrual cup anywhere up there.

00:30:40 Speaker 2

And it is just, it's really funny.

00:30:42 Speaker 2

There's a sequel called Murder on a Summer Break.

00:30:46 Speaker 2

Just great, filthy, foul-mouthed, got a really solid heart to it and really good for kind of identity politics in later teens as well.

00:30:56 Speaker 2

So yeah, those are my recommendations at the moment.

00:30:59 Speaker 1

What are you reading at the moment?

00:31:01 Speaker 2

So I finished two books yesterday.

00:31:03 Speaker 1

Oh.

00:31:03 Speaker 2

I had one, so they're both from the library.

00:31:05 Speaker 2

I had one on my phone and one in an actual book.

00:31:07 Speaker 2

I read, I finished a book called Long Live Evil,

00:31:09 Speaker 2

which I'm really gutted to discover though,

00:31:11 Speaker 2

it ends on a cliffhanger and the sequel isn't out until May, which is really annoying.

00:31:16 Speaker 2

And I just finished a book which is called My Inner Child Wants to Murder Mindfully on my phone, which is a sequel to a book which I haven't read.

00:31:25 Speaker 2

And I'm also halfway through a book by TJ Klune, who writes beautiful, absolutely beautiful queer fantasy found family books.

00:31:35 Speaker 2

It's called In the Lives of Puppets, which is about a boy who lives with some robots, including a very anxious vacuum cleaner.

00:31:45 Speaker 2

It's fabulous.

00:31:47 Speaker 1

One of the things I'm reflecting on as you're talking is that there is potential to think of a professor at Oxford University...

00:31:54 Speaker 1

you should only read Dickens, you should only read Bronte, or you should only read Shakespeare.

00:32:00 Speaker 1

You love everything.

00:32:01 Speaker 1

It seems in all different genres.

00:32:03 Speaker 2

Yeah, absolutely.

00:32:04 Speaker 2

I will read absolutely anything at all.

00:32:06 Speaker 2

I love a meta book.

00:32:08 Speaker 2

I like a book about books, books about underground libraries, secret bookshops, codes, level of those.

00:32:14 Speaker 2

But yeah, I will read pretty much anything and enjoy it.

00:32:19 Speaker 1

Which books have most influenced your work or life, do you think?

00:32:24 Speaker 2

That's a really hard question.

00:32:27 Speaker 2

There's a running joke that if anyone asks me to figure out my top five favourite books of all time, then it's a different 5, but also it's probably a different 20 every time.

00:32:37 Speaker 2

I think I've always been an avid reader right from the start.

00:32:43 Speaker 2

And I remember in particular, so I went to a school in Cambridge where there was a teacher who was the daughter-in-law of Lucy M

00:32:51 Speaker 2

Boston, who was a children's author.

00:32:54 Speaker 2

And she wrote books about the children of Green Knowe.

00:32:57 Speaker 2

And every year, Mrs.

00:32:59 Speaker 2

Boston used to take a trip of kids to the house where Lucy M Boston lived.

00:33:05 Speaker 2

And this house, it was just the manor at Hemingford Grey, is the house in the books.

00:33:11 Speaker 2

And a lot of the objects in the books are real and exist.

00:33:15 Speaker 2

And

00:33:17 Speaker 2

And I joined the school late, so I'd missed this trip.

00:33:20 Speaker 2

But she was arranging to take someone who'd missed it because they were ill.

00:33:22 Speaker 2

And she took me and this other kid.

00:33:24 Speaker 2

So we went on a trip to the manor, just the two of us, and met Lucy M Boston, who was this little tiny kind of bird-like woman, really bright eye.

00:33:32 Speaker 2

I mean, she must have been late 80s, early 90s when I met her.

00:33:36 Speaker 2

She was really just a kind of tiny beam of life.

00:33:42 Speaker 2

And I was absolutely captivated by

00:33:45 Speaker 2

the manor.

00:33:46 Speaker 2

I'd read all the books.

00:33:47 Speaker 2

It was like walking into your favourite books.

00:33:51 Speaker 2

I love that kind of idea that a book enables you to, it puts into words something that you have felt or seen but couldn't put into words yourself.

00:34:03 Speaker 2

And that moment of recognition is really important.

00:34:07 Speaker 2

And I think I just always loved, I always loved reading and stories from that moment onwards.

00:34:13 Speaker 2

And

00:34:13 Speaker 2

I mean, I became an English teacher when I was at a kind of crossroads in my life.

00:34:17 Speaker 2

I was like, as I said, I started out as a medieval celticist, and then I was like, what do I do next?

00:34:23 Speaker 2

And my grandfather and grandmother were both primary school teachers, and my grandfather died my final year at university in about August.

00:34:30 Speaker 2

I sent an email to our local teacher training college, which was Leeds Trinity, and said,

00:34:36 Speaker 2

Could I be an English teacher?

00:34:37 Speaker 2

If I went and did an MA in English to get some knowledge about English, could I be an English teacher?

00:34:41 Speaker 2

Because my degree was in Anglo-Saxon, North and Celtic, and they were like, come for interview.

00:34:45 Speaker 2

And I was like, oh, okay.

00:34:47 Speaker 2

And then we had a conversation about Our Mutual Friend by Charles Dickens.

00:34:51 Speaker 2

This is another very, very important influential book, which there'd been a fantastic BBC adaptation of.

00:34:55 Speaker 2

And so I'd read Our Mutual Friend, which is absolutely a chonker.

00:34:59 Speaker 2

And it's probably the longest Charles Dickens I've ever been bothered with.

00:35:02 Speaker 2

And so I went from thinking about it to being on a course about a week later and then becoming a teacher in North Yorkshire and loving books, but also kind of wanted, that led me to the point where I was like, what more can I do?

00:35:18 Speaker 2

I want to know more about this.

00:35:20 Speaker 2

I want to know about how this works, which is where I came into academia from, I guess.

00:35:24 Speaker 1

So where did you grow up?

00:35:26 Speaker 1

Was it North Yorkshire?

00:35:27 Speaker 2

I grew up all over the place.

00:35:29 Speaker 2

So I was born in Inverness.

00:35:32 Speaker 2

We lived in, we moved to Bedfordshire.

00:35:36 Speaker 2

Then my mother went and did her PhD at the University of Liverpool.

00:35:39 Speaker 2

So I lived there from the age of four to seven.

00:35:41 Speaker 2

And then we moved to Cambridge.

00:35:43 Speaker 2

And then when I was about 10, we moved back up to West Yorkshire

00:35:48 Speaker 2

and just between Leeds and Bradford on the moors there.

00:35:51 Speaker 2

So which is why I was saying about Charlotte Bronte earlier, like I grew up, because I was at a girls school in that area, we read a lot of Charlotte Bronte, well a lot of Bronte's, not just Charlotte Bronte.

00:36:01 Speaker 2

And then I kind of came down south and discovered that not everyone read a whole bunch of Bronte novels during their teens.

00:36:07 Speaker 2

I was like, oh, right.

00:36:09 Speaker 1

What is it that that got you passionate about the education side of things?

00:36:14 Speaker 2

I think that was, I mean, I'd always loved, I came in loving literature.

00:36:17 Speaker 2

I came in being passionate about conveying books, teaching, those kinds of things.

00:36:23 Speaker 2

But I very rapidly came to see the difference that teaching makes in some kids' lives.

00:36:29 Speaker 2

And I think that's what really drives me is that sense of what a difference education can make, what a difference individual teachers can make

00:36:40 Speaker 2

and what a difference the right book can make, those kinds of things.

00:36:47 Speaker 2

I was working in a massive comprehensive school with a really diverse intake and I was teaching both, kind of, my very first year of teaching, I had both the very bottom set, year 8, and we did have ability grouping there or attainment grouping, but some of those year 8 kids couldn't read,

00:37:09 Speaker 2

And couldn't write.

00:37:10 Speaker 2

Some of them were verging on non-verbal.

00:37:14 Speaker 2

And then I also had the very opposite end of the spectrum.

00:37:17 Speaker 2

I had the very top set year eight as well.

00:37:19 Speaker 2

And I think that really opened my eyes to all of the needs that were out there.

00:37:25 Speaker 2

And I think, yeah, it's about doing the best for everybody.

00:37:31 Speaker 2

It's about enabling people to reach their potential and enabling people to not be

00:37:38 Speaker 2

crushed by the system.

00:37:40 Speaker 1

When you're identifying yourself, what is it that first comes to mind?

00:37:44 Speaker 1

Do you say that you're an academic?

00:37:45 Speaker 1

Do you say that you are a lecturer?

00:37:48 Speaker 1

Do you say that you're a researcher?

00:37:49 Speaker 1

Do you say you're a director?

00:37:51 Speaker 1

What is it that you say?

00:37:54 Speaker 2

That's interesting.

00:37:55 Speaker 1

It's different in different places.

00:37:57 Speaker 2

It's different in different places.

00:37:58 Speaker 2

I think until I became Director of Graduate Studies, I would definitely say, I would definitely have primarily identified as an English teacher.

00:38:04 Speaker 2

And this is quite, we have a kind of little conversation among the PGCE tutors because, you know, if you're a maths tutor, you identify as a mathematician.

00:38:12 Speaker 2

If you're a geography tutor, you identify as a geographer.

00:38:14 Speaker 2

If you're an English one, you would identify as an English teacher.

00:38:18 Speaker 2

That's kind of like, it's, we're not literature scholars, we're English teachers.

00:38:21 Speaker 2

Now I mostly identify as someone who answers emails and puts out metaphorical

00:38:25 Speaker 2

fires.

00:38:28 Speaker 1

So my next question was going to be, what is it that you find most challenging about your profession or your role?

00:38:32 Speaker 1

Is that what it is, putting out the fires?

00:38:35 Speaker 2

Actually, no, putting out fires is fine.

00:38:37 Speaker 2

I think it's about finding the balance.

00:38:40 Speaker 2

It's about being able to both do this kind of work, which is really, so the research, which is really important, but then also being able to

00:38:49 Speaker 2

deliver, when you're teaching a lecture, you have to make sure that that's the best lecture that you can give.

00:38:56 Speaker 2

I think the most rewarding aspect of my life kind of outside of the research, and possibly even including the research, is supervising students.

00:39:04 Speaker 2

I think that's something that I really, really value, just being in a room, talking to people about their ideas, helping them to figure out where they're going with it, what the best way of doing it is, and watching these really brilliant minds

00:39:17 Speaker 2

kind of shape their futures and come up with a new knowledge of tomorrow.

00:39:20 Speaker 2

So that's, I mean, it's a real, it's a real privilege to work with doctoral students and it's, I really love it.

00:39:27 Speaker 1

And that sounds like that's what you liked about being a teacher too, showing the development of those younger students too.

00:39:33 Speaker 2

I think that's it, yes.

00:39:34 Speaker 2

It's all about, it's all about kind of the coaching, the moving forward, the developing.

00:39:40 Speaker 2

And that's, I mean, it's the same with working with colleagues and staff and mentoring new lecturers, all of those kind of things.

00:39:47 Speaker 1

And you have two children.

00:39:48 Speaker 1

Has being a mother changed your viewpoint on education at all?

00:39:53 Speaker 2

It's made me much more worried about it on an individual level.

00:39:57 Speaker 1

Right.

00:39:58 Speaker 2

My eldest child has both a diagnosis of autism and ADHD.

00:40:03 Speaker 2

And one of the reasons that I pursued that for them was because I am very aware how schools can, they require a certain amount of conformity and children are

00:40:15 Speaker 2

now quite often required to control themselves to a much greater extent than they were when we were children.

00:40:22 Speaker 2

Like there is a kind of a sense that school is more work and less play than it was 35 years ago.

00:40:28 Speaker 2

And I didn't want them to be punished for what they couldn't help.

00:40:36 Speaker 2

So I think that's one thing.

00:40:37 Speaker 2

I am, I mean we have a lovely school.

00:40:39 Speaker 2

I'm really happy with our village school.

00:40:42 Speaker 2

It's great.

00:40:42 Speaker 2

It's actually where my husband went.

00:40:44 Speaker 2

So that's kind of weird.

00:40:46 Speaker 2

And they're both doing really well.

00:40:49 Speaker 2

I think that it's, I am concerned about whether, I'm concerned about the pressures of school, because the really high pressure that teachers are under, that schools are under to deliver results, and that naturally comes out on the children.

00:41:05 Speaker 2

And I do, I do think that we need something to shift a little bit.

00:41:11 Speaker 2

And you know, there's

00:41:12 Speaker 2

unprecedented levels of mental health issues with teenagers.

00:41:16 Speaker 2

And I think that a large amount of that can be traced to the ways that schools have become, not because they want to be, but because of the pressures that kind of contribute to a vicious circle.

00:41:29 Speaker 1

And I'm interested, is that viewpoint coming from your place as a parent or is it from your profession or a bit of both?

00:41:35 Speaker 2

It's a bit of both.

00:41:36 Speaker 2

I mean, I think that it is undeniable that

00:41:40 Speaker 2

league tables and the kind of accountability culture have changed the ways that schools are.

00:41:47 Speaker 2

And there is some evidence, well, I mean, there's a correlation between changes in the exam system.

00:41:53 Speaker 2

There's obviously, we've also got all sorts of other things going on that can cause mental health issues in young people, including a climate crisis and a pandemic not very long ago.

00:42:05 Speaker 2

But there are

00:42:06 Speaker 2

stress about exams, stress about attainment is a really important contributing fact to young people's mental health issues.

00:42:15 Speaker 2

And I mean, it just wasn't like that back in the day because it didn't effectively, it didn't really matter what you got in your GCSEs in the 90s.

00:42:25 Speaker 2

You know, you had another chance and now it feels very much like, whether it's true or not, it feels very much like

00:42:33 Speaker 2

people regard their GCSEs as kind of really key.

00:42:36 Speaker 2

And they are, they're life chances.

00:42:37 Speaker 2

if you don't get your grades and you can't go and do 6th form, whatever it might be.

00:42:42 Speaker 2

So I think there's a lot of pressure on students to attain in a way that there perhaps wasn't when I was a kid.

00:42:52 Speaker 1

Where will your research take you next, do you think?

00:42:56 Speaker 2

I'm working on some stuff to do with context.

00:42:58 Speaker 2

I am really interested in the ways we make meaning out of texts.

00:43:03 Speaker 2

And so I'm working on some things to do with historical context and the way that that's brought to bear when we're teaching poetry.

00:43:09 Speaker 2

We're also in the, we, as in me, working with Nicole Dingwall and Gary Snapper, we're in the process of replicating a survey that Peter Benton did here in 1999 and in 1984, I think.

00:43:27 Speaker 2

And so it's a kind of every 20 years roughly survey of poetry teaching practices.

00:43:33 Speaker 2

And so we're really interested to see how poetry teaching has evolved or changed over the last 40 years compared to Peter's results back then.

00:43:44 Speaker 1

You've mentioned there about your concerns and obviously now with the viewpoint of being a parent as well.

00:43:49 Speaker 1

I'm wondering if there are any other big challenges in education that you're concerned about in the next few years.

00:43:55 Speaker 2

I think the major thing that's going to happen in England in the next few years is this massive curriculum change.

00:44:01 Speaker 2

And it is going to be a big challenge for teachers and for schools.

00:44:07 Speaker 2

I was involved with some research here about the new GCSE reforms that started in 2017.

00:44:14 Speaker 2

And one of the things that we got from that was schools basically asking for bedding in time.

00:44:20 Speaker 2

They wanted something that was kind of not everything all at once.

00:44:25 Speaker 2

And I think that we are back in that situation.

00:44:27 Speaker 2

We've just had a massive curriculum review.

00:44:29 Speaker 2

There is a kind of suggestion there that might be a once every decade thing.

00:44:33 Speaker 2

And actually, perhaps we want some rolling stuff that kind of takes different subjects at a time, so that there's a bit more, there's not kind of a sudden rush every 10 years to have a major overhaul of your curriculum.

00:44:44 Speaker 2

But one of the issues to do with that is that we are finding on the PGCE, and more generally in fact, that there is a,

00:44:54 Speaker 2

There's less of an opportunity for teachers to plan their own lessons that they're being provided with lesson plans and schemes to work from central sources, which is great in terms of reducing your workload.

00:45:09 Speaker 2

but it means that if you're not able to then plan your own lessons or to adjust them for your own classes, then we are worried teachers are becoming de-skilled and

particularly younger entrants to the profession who will have been provided with materials right from the start of their careers.

00:45:24 Speaker 2

And we're about to have a massive curriculum shift where everyone's going to have a new scheme to work for everything.

00:45:29 Speaker 2

And so I think there's something

00:45:31 Speaker 2

We need to look at planning and how teachers plan and enabling people to really upskill in those areas.

00:45:38 Speaker 1

When you think about some of the challenges that we've talked about today, does it make you feel weary or does it make you feel energised to try and be able to push your impact and to make your changes?

00:45:49 Speaker 2

Bit of both.

00:45:50 Speaker 2

There's a couple of quotes that I really love about this and one is allegedly from the Talmud, but I'm not actually sure if it is, but it's something along the lines of you don't have to do everything.

00:46:01 Speaker 2

But neither are you allowed to stop.

00:46:03 Speaker 2

So you have to do your bit, even if you can't change everything, you have to carry on doing your bit.

00:46:09 Speaker 2

And then there's another one which comes from somewhere I can't remember at all, which is not very helpful, but it's, you cannot do all the good in the world, but the world needs all the good you can do.

00:46:18 Speaker 2

And so, you know, we keep fighting.

00:46:21 Speaker 2

And there's lots of people who've been fighting for a long time for positive change, and we just do what we can.

00:46:28 Speaker 2

And if it changes the life of one person, that's enough.

00:46:33 Speaker 1

And presumably you've got an opportunity being based at this department at the University of Oxford to be able to have some impact on some of these challenges, at least in your own way, as you say.

00:46:43 Speaker 2

Yes, I mean, it's undoubted that the name of the Department carries weight.

00:46:48 Speaker 2

Both as an institution, I mean, Oxford is obviously

00:46:52 Speaker 2

Older than the Aztec Empire.

00:46:55 Speaker 1

As they keep throwing out there.

00:46:57 Speaker 2

Yeah, but also, this is on an education term.

00:47:01 Speaker 2

This is one of, this is a venerated teacher training institution from over 100 years ago.

00:47:08 Speaker 2

It is also the internship model here on the PGCE is one of the, one of the roots of teacher training in this country, and it is a privilege to work

00:47:19 Speaker 2

with really amazing colleagues, but also really amazing students.

00:47:22 Speaker 2

And because of that, we get, amazing future teachers.

00:47:25 Speaker 2

We get amazing current teachers coming to work with us on our MSc in Learning and Teaching.

00:47:29 Speaker 2

We get amazing teacher educators coming to work with us on our MSc Teacher Education.

00:47:34 Speaker 2

And so it's a real, it's the best place to be, to make impact.

00:47:43 Speaker 1

So what we're saying to prospective students is apply now.

00:47:47 Speaker 2

Always, definitely.

00:47:50 Speaker 1

Well, thank you so much for your time today, Velda, and for fitting us into your very busy schedule.

00:47:55 Speaker 1

You can find out more about the Department, Lit in Colour and Velda on our website, education.ox.ac.uk.

00:48:03 Speaker 1

Join us again for another episode of Education Explored, the Department of Education at the University of Oxford podcast.