Tes focus on...

Raciolinguistics

Schools' insistence on the use of standard English and received pronunciation risks stigmatising pupils who don't speak this way, warn experts – but research in the field of raciolinguistics offers a new, more inclusive approach, finds **Molly Bolding**

During our tutoring sessions, James (not his real name) repeatedly apologised for the quality of his writing. He said his teachers had told him that he needed to learn to write and speak "better" if he wanted to succeed.

In reality, his work was excellent and I had high hopes for his GCSE grades – although I did have to point out occasionally that while Macbeth does, indeed, have "a strange vibe", he probably couldn't write his analysis quite like that in the exam.

James' family's first language is Jamaican Patois, which, like other creole languages, is a product of colonisation. Patois has recognisably English vocabulary but pronunciation and grammar patterns that echo a range of African languages and dialects.

While James was used to code switching – changing the way we speak depending on our environment – he hadn't found it as easy to adapt his writing, so he was scoring poorly in his practice exam answers.

As James' tutor, striking the crucial balance between celebrating his unique linguistic strengths and helping him to meet the exam paper's prescriptive standards was a challenge – one that many teachers will undoubtedly recognise.

That balance is what the field of raciolinguistics aims to raise awareness of.

Ian Cushing is a lecturer in education at Brunel University London whose latest work focuses on language policies in English schools. The term "raciolinguistics", he explains, "has its origins in critical work from America", in the works of writers and theorists of colour, "and a long tradition of people working in sociolinguistics and educational linguistics and anthropology".

While that might sound a world away from UK classrooms, there are several ideas within the field of raciolinguistics that it would be useful for teachers everywhere to understand, says Cushing.

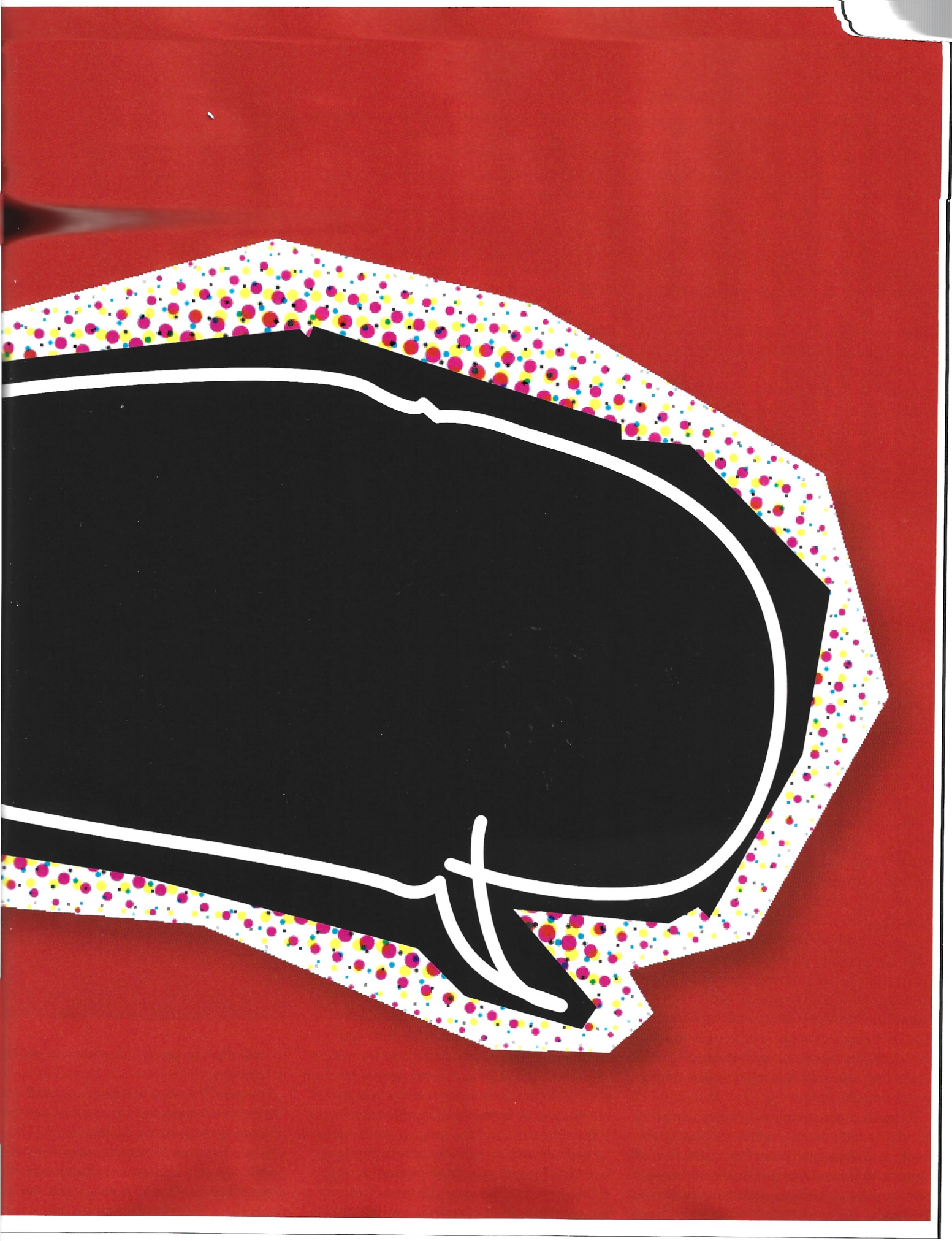
It is a complex field but, essentially, raciolinguistics involves an academic interrogation of the relationship between language and race. Specifically, "raciolinguistics...offers a way of thinking about [how] language racialises speakers and traditionally positions [racialised speakers] as substandard to white speakers".

Nelson Flores, an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a specialist in bilingual education, agrees that raciolinguistics is an area that holds relevance for the work that goes on in schools. His recent work explores the fundamental dichotomy of language in educational contexts, which he believes creates a fictional distinction between "academic" and "non-academic" speech.

He says that this distinction is an example of a raciolinguistic ideology – one of the many common beliefs about language that reinforce so-called "linguistic racism". This harms racialised students, Flores explains, by implying that their "non-academic" speech is a deficit to be corrected rather than effective language in its own right.

Teachers need to be aware of such ideologies, suggests Cushing, to avoid assumptions that "construe racialised speakers as having imagined linguistic deficiencies... through the ears of white people".

Upholding standard English in received pronunciation as the single model of



proper speech and writing, he continues, discriminates against some students.

That doesn't only apply to students of colour; similar ideology is at the root of stigma surrounding many accents, including Cockney, Multicultural London and accents from the North of England and the West Country.

The focus on standard English in schools is problematic, Cushing points out, because this is "a constructed language" that has historically been used to oppress. "The written version was invented in the 1400s by white, upper-middle-class mostly men... By people who occupy positions of power and privilege... [By the 19th century], there was also European colonialism during which 'standard English' was a tool of governance and power."

Another way to think of standard English, says Flores, is as a "language that exists outside of bodies". In other words, it is an ideal, rather than the reality of how people speak.

Raciolinguistics, therefore, asks us to recognise the myth of standard English, and the need to look beyond it. Indeed, another leading academic in the field, April Baker-Bell, of Michigan State University, rejects the name "standard English" altogether in favour of what she considers a more accurate term: "white mainstream English".

But raciolinguistics also offers a model for change. "It's an analytical stance, which shifts the attention away from the stigmatised practices of racialised speakers... and towards the way that white people listen," explains Cushing.

This perspective, pioneered by academics like Flores, requires the listener to adjust their perceptions rather than asking racialised speakers to adjust their voices. Flores explains that with this reconceptualisation, we "can move away from dichotomous views of language... [and] begin to perceive the language practices of students as what they are, rather than what they supposedly aren't."

All this may sound very theoretical and divorced from the reality of your classroom, but Cushing is keen to point out the connection between these ideas and policies that are being put in place in schools today. He highlights the recent introduction of a "slang ban" at a school in south-east London as just one example.

"If you're a school or you're a teacher who decides to implement a policy that says that teachers and students must use standard English, or if non-standard English is being heavily policed in classrooms and schools, it's easy to see how those policies are perpetuating linguistic racism due to the inherent whiteness of 'standard English' and the histories of racism that are associated with it," he explains.

As evidenced at the start of this article, such policies can lead students like James to feel a sense of shame about the way that they write and speak, which, in turn, can negatively affect their self-esteem and academic performance.

However, Cushing stresses that we should not be placing blame on individual teachers here. It is more about raising awareness of the larger structures that feed into how these issues play out in schools.

"It's important that teachers recognise that linguistic racism and, indeed, all forms of racism or stigma don't necessarily manifest themselves [only] through individual events, but they're instead much bigger sociopolitical and economic structures," says Cushing.

That said, there are still steps that teachers can take to reduce the impact of these broader structures in their classroom.

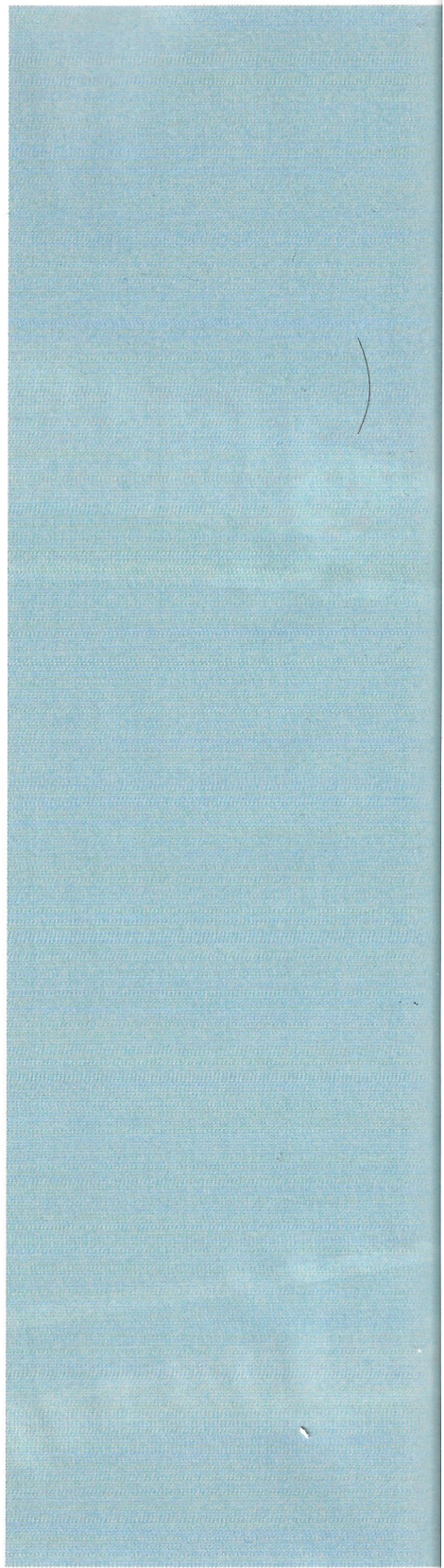
Karl Pupé, a teacher based in London who has spent much of his career working with students with severe social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties, suggests that, as a teacher, "it's not [enough] to just say you're not racist, you've got to be antiracist".

The first step is to reflect on your own practice and assumptions. For instance, while many schools are keen to emphasise the advantages of their multicultural student body, Pupé says, they are not always as good at recognising the day-to-day reality of that experience for students.

Having previously witnessed white teachers telling racialised students that their vocabulary is poor or that they are inarticulate, Pupé wants more teachers to recognise how such comments can create a sense of "constant otherness", which "wears people down".

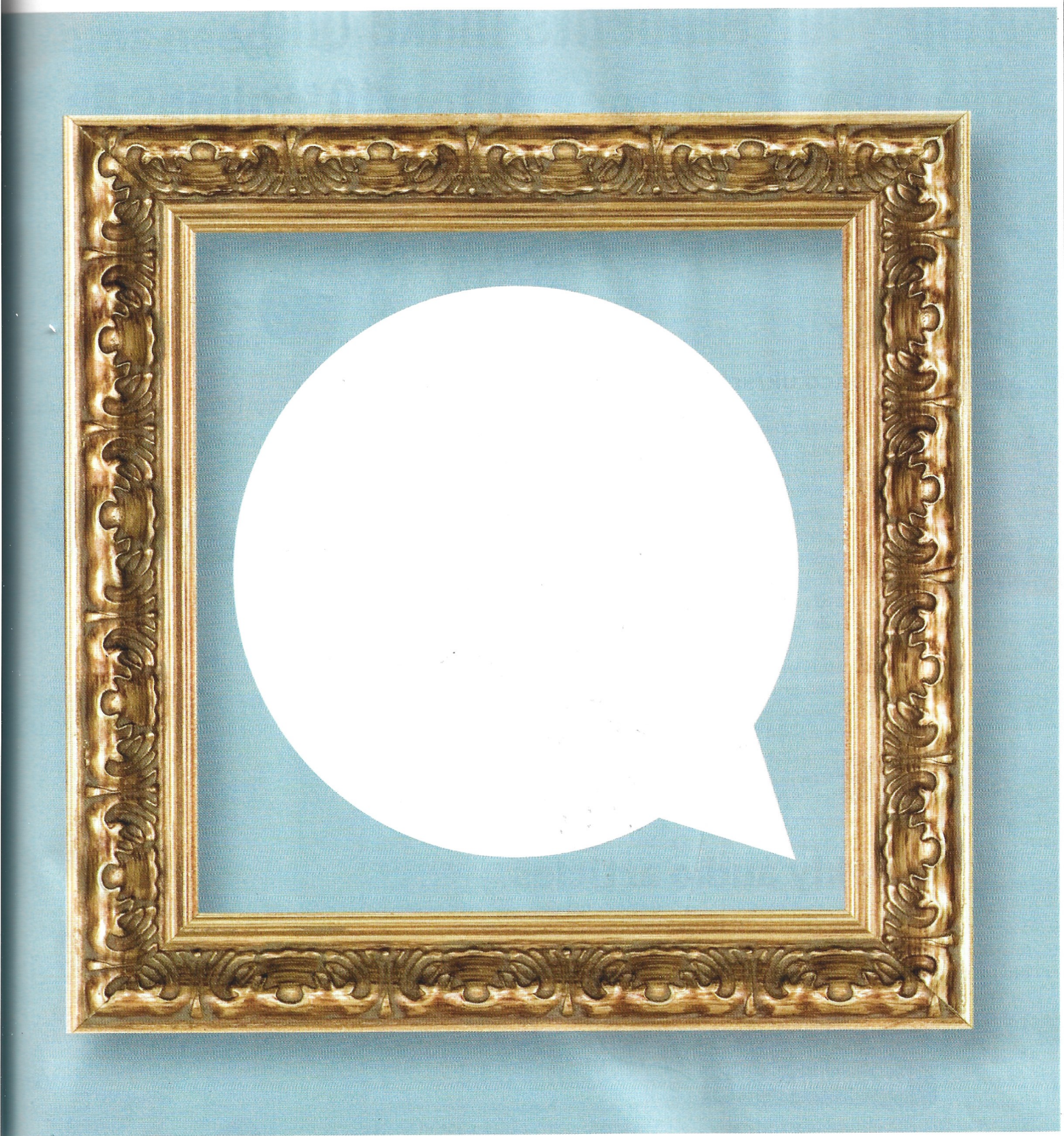
When it comes to slang or unfamiliar speech, rather than shaming or shying away from it, he encourages teachers to try to "understand their [students' personal] context, ask gently what they are saying [if you are unsure], and don't be frightened to let it into the classroom... It'll give you an insight into [your students'] world."

Embracing non-judgemental discussion about differences in language can help to create rapport between staff and students, Pupé suggests. And the insights generated by such discussion can also have learning benefits: Flores argues that supporting all students to appreciate the nuance of language should be seen as an opportunity



to help them to speak and write in a variety of contexts.

Amanda Wilson, a primary headteacher in Greenwich, south-east London, agrees that discussing these issues in class is key. She says she has seen increasing support for the prioritisation of antiracism education in all areas of local authority policy – and she has made this a focus for the culture of her school



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Creating that culture has meant "opening the door to having discussions [about these issues] and...opening the door to having those discussions with students," she says.

Facilitating meaningful discussion among students has also encouraged her teachers to examine their own language choices: "It's about not being afraid to ask those questions, especially if you know you are asking them because you are genuinely trying to understand and get things right," she says.

At the end of the day, as Flores argues, "the art of language is not about following a script".

Finding the balance to ensure that students like James have the language they need to succeed in exams, without limiting their linguistic horizons, is never going to be simple. But raciolinguistics invites us to consider not only the potential alleviation of harm but also the genuine benefits that a new approach to language in schools could provide.

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Full references for this article can be found at tes.com/magazine