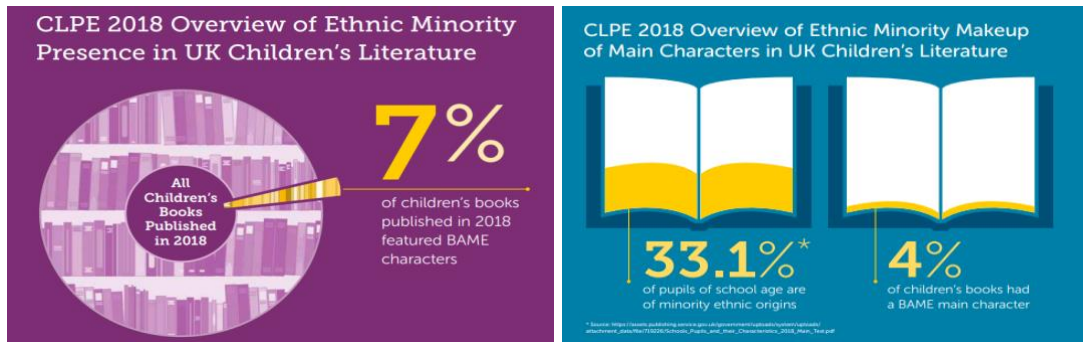


Diversifying knowledge of children's literature

Matthew Courtney

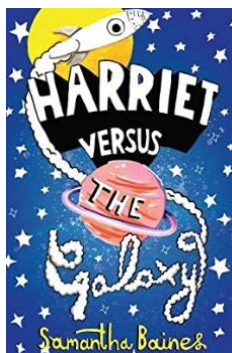
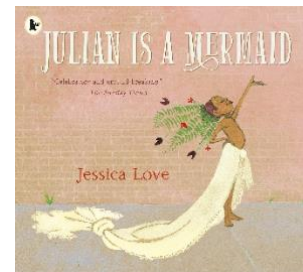
In 2019, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) released their second Reflecting Realities report, which explored ethnic representation within children's literature published in the UK. In consonance with other studies, the report highlighted the paucity of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) characters in children's literature. Only 7% of books within the study contained a BAME character, in contrast with 33.1% of UK school age children who are 'of minority ethnic origins', according to DfE statistics (DfE, 2018). Additionally, only 4% of the books in the study had a BAME main character. (CLPE, 2019).



(CLPE, 2019, pp 6-7)

There has been little research into the diversity of books within UK schools, however professional experience, anecdotal evidence, the statistics demonstrating the lack of diverse published work and research from the United States highlight that this should be an area of concern for schools and teachers.

In 2016, 'What's on Our Bookshelves' was published – a journal article which reported the results of research into the diversity of books available in Early Years classrooms in the US. The article begins by acknowledging that children's literature is lacking diversity in a variety of forms, stating that it predominately features characters who are “white... upper middle class, heterosexual, nondisabled, English-speaking, and male” (Crisp et al., 2016, p29). The article then outlines statistics on the diversity of books available in the classrooms included in the study.



The Children's Cooperative Book Centre (CCBC) have been tracking diversity in children's books published in the US since 1985. When you compare the figures of ethnic diversity in children's books in Early Years classrooms with those recorded by CCBC for the same year, it becomes evident that the books within these classrooms are even less diverse than the those published in one year. Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, LGBTQI+ characters were similarly underrepresented (only featured in 0.09% of books) as well as religious characters and those with disabilities. This is a huge cause for concern and is an issue deserving of both the attention of schools and their staff as well as funding to address this problem. In his talk at last year's Oxford Reading Spree, Darren Chetty, author and researcher, articulated one of the problems with the dearth of diverse characters in children's books in schools:

“If certain children don’t get to see themselves as protagonists, then the education system is essentially positioning them as antagonists”

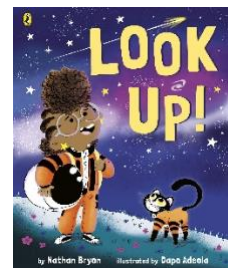
Farrah Serroukh, who leads on the CLPE’s Reflecting Realities research, describes the growing responsibility of teachers as “gatekeepers” of literature (Serroukh, 2020, p5). This responsibility is particularly pronounced when one considers the Literacy Trust research that revealed that one in eight children who receive free school meals do not own a single book of their own (Clark & Teravainen, 2017). If we are not providing opportunities for children to see their lives reflected in books in school, are they likely to encounter this elsewhere?

Kathleen Horning, director of the CBCC, has called upon teachers and librarians to be ‘agents of change’ (Horning, 2014, p8) and to promote and provide diversity within texts. However, teachers need knowledge of diverse texts in order to do this. The Teachers as Readers (TaRs) research has highlighted the importance of teachers’ possessing a considerable knowledge of children’s literature and other texts (Cremin et al, 2014). It is important to pause and reflect upon how diverse one’s knowledge is.



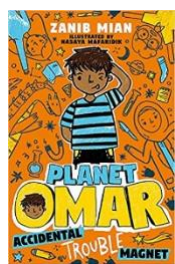
The TaRs research also comments on the lack of diversity within the children’s authors mentioned in their survey of teacher’s knowledge of children’s literature (Cremin et al, 2008). In his chapter within ‘The Good Immigrant’, Darren Chetty invites teachers to explore the diversity of their class’ favourite book characters. He encourages teachers to ask children to write down their favourite 25 children’s book characters and then record how many are white, as well as looking at other patterns including gender and disability (Chetty, 2016). Perhaps, this would also serve as a useful audit for teacher’s knowledge of diverse texts.

Dr Rudine Sims Bishop famously offers the metaphor of ‘Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors’ (Bishop, 1990) when discussing the importance and power of diverse children’s literature. She argued that all children deserve to read books that act as mirrors and enable them to see their lives reflected in the books they read. Moreover, Bainbridge and Brenna (2013) give testament to the power of diverse books to encourage and foster values of tolerance and understanding among children. This highlights the moral imperative teachers are charged with to ensure the books they provide are diverse.



Considerations for educators

When attempting to diversify their classroom libraries and curriculum, there are several considerations teachers should be mindful of. It is important that educators acknowledge that representation of one diverse character will not be a universal reflection of the experiences of an entire group. Doll and Garrison (2013) highlight the importance of considering ‘*cultural pluralism*’ (Doll & Garrison, 2013, p13) – which they describe as ‘the distinct differences between people within the same cultural group’. Educators can ensure they acknowledge cultural pluralism in the texts they make available to children by ensuring they include a vast range of diverse texts.



Additionally, it is vital that the representation of diverse characters are ‘*grounded in accurate facts and information about the cultural identifier*’ (Knowles and Smith. 2007, p7). Educators can ensure the authenticity of the books they use by choosing work by authors who have lived the experience they are writing about. The #OwnVoices movement was established in response to the need for authentic texts and the lack of diversity in writers of published works. The term was coined by Corrine Duyvis and highlights when an author includes a character inspired by their lived experience (Aymar, 2018).

However, just as diverse characters are underrepresented in children's literature, diverse authors are similarly underrepresented. The CBCC have been monitoring number of texts written by diverse authors alongside their statistics on the diversity of characters. Corrie (2018) highlights that in 2018 only 29% of children's books written about black children were written by black authors. Although #OwnVoices texts are even less common than diverse books, they can be an excellent way to ensure texts are authentic. By selecting #OwnVoices books, educators can ensure that texts contain accurate portrayals of different experiences and negate the risk of them promoting a negative stereotype.

Links and resources

Please see below for a list of links and resources that will support you to diversify your own knowledge of children's literature and, therefore, the books you read with and to children.

Beyond the Secret Garden

@rapclassroom and @ksandssoconnor

<http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/228/childrens-books/articles/beyond-the-secret-garden-part-one-the-fantasy-of-story>

A series from Darren Chetty and Prof. Karen Sands O'Connor in Books for Keeps, which discusses 'how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic voices have been represented in our national story of children's literature, and how we can bring about change'



Letterbox Library

@Letterboxlib

www.letterboxlibrary.com



A not-for-profit children's book sellers who have been selling diverse books for over 30 years. The books on their website are sorted into a range of themes including LGBT, mental health, Black history etc. Schools and settings can join for a small annual fee to receive discounts. They have book packs which to support the

'Power of Reading' scheme from the CLPE and Andrew Moffat's 'No Outsiders'.

Knights Of and Round Table Books

@_KnightsOf and @BooksRound

www.roundtablebooks.co.uk

www.knightsof.media/

Knight Of are a fantastic, UK-based, independent publishers of inclusive children's literature. They aim to "give windows into as many worlds as possible". They have launched a booksellers called Round Table Books which you can visit in Brixton or buy their books via their online shop on their website.



CENTRE FOR LITERACY
IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Centre for Literacy in Primary Education @clpe1

www.clpe.org.uk

Home to the Reflecting Realities reports. They have a number of resources which use texts from a diverse range of perspectives; including their Corebooks and Power of Reading resources.

BAMEed

@BAMEednetwork

<https://www.bameednetwork.com/>

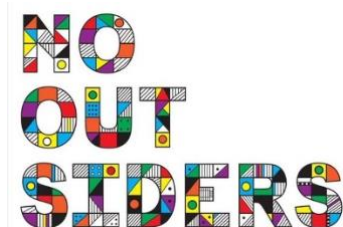
The BAMEd website contains a range of resources to actively promote diversity in the education sector including book lists for both adults and children.



No Outsiders

@moffat_andrew

www.no-outsiders.com



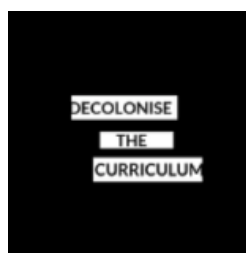
Andrew Moffat's website and home to the No Outsiders programme, which aims to "create a positive school ethos where everyone feels they belong". It uses inclusive texts, such as Mommy, Mama and ME.

Tiny Owl

@TinyOwl_Books

www.tinyowl.co.uk

UK-based, independent publishers of multicultural children's books. Their website includes a blog and an online newsletter. They also have free posters featuring some of their books and characters that would be great to complement a book corner or school library.



Decolonise the Curriculum

@MrPranPatel

www.decolonisethecurriculum.com/

This website, from Pran Patel, contains a range of resources including reading lists for adults and blog posts including those which critically analyse children's literature such as Dahl's work.

Scope – Storybooks Featuring Disabled Children

@scope

www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/storybooks-featuring-disabled-children/

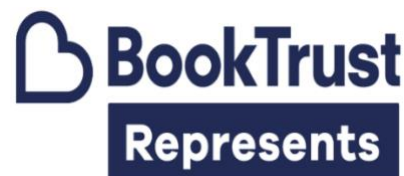
Scope is a disability equality charity. This link contains free PDF storybooks which feature children with disabilities as well as links to recommended texts featuring characters with a range of different disabilities.

SCOPE

BookTrust Represents

@BookTrust

www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-and-campaigns/booktrust-represents/



BookTrust Represents is 'a project created to promote and improve the representation of people of colour in children's books so that all children read a range of books that reflect them and their wider communities'. Their website contains a 'Support for Schools' section and links to book packs created by Letterbox Library.

British BAME authors and illustrators

@MattLibrarian

www.teenlibrarian.co.uk/british-bame-authors-illustrators-publishers/

A list of British BAME authors and illustrators, compiled by librarian Matt Imrie

Pen&Inc

@PenandIncBooks

www.cilip.org.uk/page/Penincsubscription

Published twice a year, Pen and Inc is CILIP's guide to 'current diverse and inclusive books for children and young people'

Pen&inc.



Matthew Courtney is a primary school teacher and middle leader at Goresbrook School. He is also a OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group Leader. He tweets at @mattweduk

References

- Aymar, E.A. (2018) #OwnVoices. Available at: <http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/index.php/features/ownvoices> (Accessed: 4 January 2020).
- Bainbridge, J. & Brenna, B. (2013) 'Picture Books and Pedagogy: from Possibilities to Practice', in I. Johnston & J. Bainbridge. (eds.) *Reading Diversity Through Canadian Picture Books: Preservice Teachers Explore Issues of Identity, Ideology and Pedagogy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 18-40.
- Bishop, R.S. (1990) 'Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors', *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6 (3), pp. x-xi.
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE). (2019) *Reflecting Realities: Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2018*. London: CLPE.
- Chetty, D. (2016) "You cant say that! Stories have to be about white people" in N. Shukla (ed.) *The Good Immigrant*. London: Unbound, pp 96-107.
- Clark, C. & Teravainen, A. (2017) *Book Ownership and Reading Outcomes*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- Corrie, J. (2018) The Diversity Gap in Children's Book Publishing. Available at: <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2018/05/10/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-book-publishing-2018/> (Accessed: 8 April 2020).
- Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Bearne, E., & Goodwin, P. (2008) 'Exploring teachers' knowledge of children's literature', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38 (4), pp. 449-464.
- Cremin, T. Mottram, M. Powell, S, Collins R and Safford K. (2014) *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for pleasure* London and NY: Routledge.
- Crisp, T., Knezek, S.M., Quinn, M., Bingham, G.E., Girardeau, K. & Starks, F. (2016) 'What's on Our Bookshelves? The Diversity of Children's Literature in Early Childhood Classroom Libraries', *Journal of Children's Literature*, 42 (2), pp 29-42.
- Department for Education (DfE). (2018) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2018*. London: DfE.
- Doll, C. & Garrison, K. (2013) 'Voices of experience: promoting acceptance of other cultures', in J.C. Naidoo. & S. P. Dahlen. (eds.) *Diversity in Youth Literature: Opening Doors Through Reading*. Chicago: American Library Association, pp. 3-13.
- Horning, K.T. (2014) 'Still an All-White World?' *School Library Journal*, 60 (5), p 18.
- Knowles, L. & Smith, M. (2007) *Understanding Diversity Through Novels and Picture Books*. Westport: Libraries Unlimited.
- Serroukh, F. (2020) 'Reflecting realities: nurturing reader identity' in CLPE. *Power of a Rich Reading Classroom*. London: Corwin, pp 3-10.