

# Beyond the Reading for Pleasure Agenda

## Exploring Humanity through Books and Considering the 11<sup>th</sup> Right of the Reader

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*This column is a new addition to NALDIC Quarterly. It marks what will be a regular feature promoting quality children's literature as a means of informing teaching and learning and exploring themes prevalent to supporting children from ethnic minority backgrounds and those with English as an additional language. Farrah Serroukh is Programme Leader at the CLPE and we are grateful for the Centre's contribution.*

Throughout its 40 year history, the CLPE has been dedicated to researching what defines best practice in the teaching and learning of all aspects of literacy, interpreting education policy with integrity and providing a professional development programme of support that inspires, equips and empowers teachers to engage and enthuse children to be literate. Our work has always been grounded in a clearly defined pedagogy and ethos. We stand on the shoulders of the giants who have come before us and we take the responsibility of the baton that has been passed on to us very seriously, because the fundamental right of every child to be literate and enjoy literature has and always will lie at the heart of our core mission. This informs the design and content of our comprehensive professional development programme, action research and publications, as well as our online teaching resources.

Reading is a fundamental skill and by extension, the experience of reading for pleasure is invaluable. This has been reiterated in a number of studies, national initiatives and government reports published in recent years, which have spearheaded the trend towards the necessity of fostering positive reading cultures and determining what 'reading for pleasure' looks like in our schools. The Institute of Education's 2013 report<sup>1</sup> highlighted the very real distinction in positive outcomes between children who had access to books and read frequently beyond the classroom and those who had not. The study suggested that the former group of children were far more likely to academically surpass the latter, regardless of the academic background of their main carer. It found reading enjoyment to be more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status and asserted that reading for pleasure could be one important

way to help combat social exclusion and raise educational standards.

Engagement with and enthusiasm for reading has always been central to our work at the CLPE and has also been a key policy focus in the last decade. In 2004, the former Chief Inspector of Schools, David Bell stated that, 'we need to reflect upon the reading material available in schools and whether it entices children to want to read.'<sup>2</sup> In the 2011 *Excellence in English Report*, the significance of taking the 'business of reading for pleasure seriously' is also highlighted. These examples emphasise the extent to which such a sound investment reaps rewards both in terms of attainment and engagement. The 2012 *Moving English Forward* report noted a lack of curriculum time assigned to developing a reading for pleasure culture, and the summary of research outlined in the *Research Evidence on Reading for Pleasure 2012* report consolidated why due consideration needed to be given to this aspect of provision, which is now enshrined as a statutory responsibility for schools in the English National Curriculum.

An investment in developing a reading for pleasure culture is an investment in supporting children in becoming reflective, empathetic and emotionally intelligent individuals. Books immerse children in worlds beyond their own (Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004) and it is through this immersion that children have the opportunity to contemplate and experience other realities. Reading is an act that allows us to explore our humanity by encouraging us to identify and empathise with characters and plot lines that exist outside of our own frame of reference. In doing so, we consider our own perspective on what it means to be human as well as explore pertinent societal issues. The late Walter Dean Myers quite simply captured the heart of the problem posed by

a lack of representation in literature when he said: 'Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity. What is the message when some children are not represented in those books?'

*The Rights of the Reader* (Pennac, 1992) outlined the fundamental rights that every developing reader should be entitled to and argued that adherence to these rights would support the cultivation of a lifelong reader, which I believe should be our ultimate goal. The book culminates in a declaration of ten rights, one of which is 'the right not to finish a book.' On the surface, such a right appears controversial, but the rationale is clear. What the assurance of such rights affords is the opportunity to reconnect disenfranchised young readers with the warmth and joy of positive early reading experiences. Honouring such rights, Pennac believes, ensures the development of sound reading behaviours that established, confident adult readers enjoy and take for granted. It prioritises an investment in nurturing life-long reading habits and a departure from the narrow preoccupation with immediate results that often consumes us and which can fragment our approach to the teaching of reading. Do you buy the first book you pick up in a bookshop or does it take time to settle on the right book? If we insist a child reads a book that they are not interested in, rather than encouraging them to browse, trial and select books until they discover one that sparks their interest, we are less likely to keep them engaged with reading. This reduces the likelihood of creating a lifelong reader.

Whilst I am in total agreement with Pennac's rights, I would propose an eleventh right: **the right of every reader to be visible**. If every reader, with all their individual differences, is reflected in literature, it allows us not only to see ourselves but also appreciate the realities of others, thus broadening our perspective. There is something tremendously powerful about seeing a fragment of oneself mirrored in the pages of a book. When a child opens a book and identifies with the protagonist, language, race, ethnicity, culture, landscape or theme, it fills the invisible space that was left unfilled in the pages of other books. This tells the child that the world sees them, is interested in them and values them; a representation of a part of who they are is important enough to be immortalised.

The oppressive power of invisibility is profound. Conversely, the empowerment that comes with visibility in literature is immense. As a teacher, a pupil's shriek of joy when coming across a name

in a book that culturally resonated with them was a common experience when reading aloud to my children. Their glowing faces, wide smiles, chests puffed with pride and the knowing looks when dialogue shifted from English to Arabic in Elizabeth Laird's *Oranges in No Man's Land* will always stay with me. They felt an immediate connection with Latif and Ayesha, not just because they may have had a friend or relative with the same name, but also because the children who shared the language, culture or heritage of the region represented in the book felt elevated by the value that their unique insight provided.

As an adult of North African heritage, my first encounter with Jeannie Baker's *Mirror* was wonderfully surreal and I found myself feeling a similar sense of elation as my pupils experienced when reading *Oranges in No Man's Land*. On the one hand, it filled my heart with joy to see a part of my heritage so delicately captured but on the other, aspects of the book were certainly problematic. It is a thoughtfully crafted picture book that attempts to counter the negative perception of newly arrived immigrants to Australia. In its efforts to positively illustrate the commonalities between two cultures by contrasting daily life in Sydney with daily life in Morocco, the book succeeds in illustrating that at our core, despite cultural differences, we share typical human experiences. Baker's representation of the country in the book is based on her own travels in and around the Valley of the Roses in Southern Morocco, and her depiction of the region is beautifully and authentically captured. Nonetheless, as well as homogenising the Moroccan experience, her choice to oppose a rural part of Morocco with highly industrialised urban Sydney reinforces the civilised/uncivilised dichotomy that exists between the Global North and South. It may have been more appropriate to compare two rural regions across the two countries or alternatively, two urban contexts to make for a more measured comparison. This would not be as problematic if the world of children's literature featured sufficiently varied representations of Moroccan life that could enable a teacher to give children a more comprehensive insight into the culture. It therefore forces us to consider how best to capture and represent different cultures and illustrates the extent to which children's literature has an important role to play in exploring other cultures. However, books always require mediation to reduce the possibility of skewing visibility and compounding the challenge further.

When books represent experiences that are beyond a child's point of reference, it allows us to consider our differences, as well as the common threads of humanity that connect us. Providing children with the opportunity to explore the essence of humanity is all the more important given that words such as 'immigrant' and 'refugee' have become sullied and distorted by a combination of the global economic downturn, recent international elections fuelled by xenophobic rhetoric and on-going divisive politics. Award-winning graphic novel *Azzi in Between*, written and illustrated by Sarah Garland, sensitively explores the all too familiar experience of a newly arrived child who has experienced the trauma of fleeing a violent and destructive context and is working hard to adapt to her new life whilst coming to terms with what has been left behind. This will strike a chord with children who share this reality and will provide a window through which their peers can better understand the resilience, bravery and true strength of character that such an adaptation requires.

Renowned author and former Children's Laureate, Malorie Blackman, has been consistently outspoken about the necessity for more diverse children's literature that more accurately reflects our society and cultures.<sup>4</sup> The full spectrum of migratory experiences needs to inform the content of children's literature to avoid polarisation. *Here I am*, written by Patti Kim and illustrated by Sonia Sanchez, captures the distinct experience of a family who have immigrated to an English speaking country. Through the clever interplay between the text and illustrations, the book depicts the isolating and overwhelming experience of adapting to a new country, culture and community. As the book progresses, the signage and language featured in the illustrations changes from initially incomprehensible symbols when the child and his family arrive, to a layered mesh of letters and eventually fathomable words. The poignant, final illustration spells out the title of the book formed by the ripples of the river, in which the child's smiling face is reflected. The fact that the child sees himself in the river in this final illustration and that the words 'here I am' can be clearly seen, illustrate that the child's self-awareness, happiness, grasp of the new language and sense of belonging are inextricably bound. It effectively captures the turmoil and trauma of moving to a new country in your formative years, particularly when you do not share the language or culture of the host country, but is optimistic in

its suggestion that such challenges will become easier with time.

Award-winning author Candy Gourlay emphasised the ceiling that invisibility can create both in terms of how we perceive ourselves and what we aspire to when she recounted that 'all the books I ever read and loved were imported from the United Kingdom or America, with pink-skinned characters and tidy settings that didn't resemble my real life in unruly Manila. As a child, I took this in stride. I simply thought that Filipinos were not allowed to be in books.'<sup>5</sup> This assumption is sadly not uncommon. I recall a child coming across the book, *Faraway Home*, written by Jane Kurtz and illustrated by E.B. Lewis, in my book corner. It is a simple story set in America in which a father explains to his young daughter that he must visit her sick grandmother in Ethiopia. He shares his childhood memories, which Lewis depicts using gentle watercolour. One of my pupils, who was of Ethiopian heritage, was stunned to have found a book that featured an Ethiopian family. He took it home to share with his parents and siblings and the following day his mother and father came in specifically to discuss the rare treasure that their son had bought home. It had provided the opportunity for them to spend hours sharing stories of their own childhoods and compare the representation of Ethiopia with their summer holiday experiences. It became a firm family favourite and stimulated hours and hours of conversations for days to come. Whilst this experience was touching, it was tainted by the fact that such excitement was rooted in the discovery of a text that exists in a void of literature that mirrored their reality.

Although the value of visibility is fundamental, it must be made very clear that this is merely the tip of the iceberg. We have a responsibility to ensure that in our efforts to increase visibility, we do not limit ourselves to a narrow set of representations. The representation of any community must be as diverse as the community itself. If the only books that feature ethnic minority characters in our classrooms are books in which struggle or poverty inherently correlate to ethnicity, then such messages problematise self-perception. Children must never feel that they are 'not allowed' to inhabit the literary space. Jamila Gavin's *Blackberry Blue*, which is a collection of traditional fairy tales for older children, each featuring protagonists from different ethnic minority backgrounds, is one example of an attempt to allow ethnic minority characters to

inhabit a space traditionally reserved for characters of European heritage.

When selecting books, we must be mindful of the quality, breadth and range of representation. We must be critically reflective about the implicit and explicit messages communicated by children's literature. We must actively choose books that encourage debate, allow us to be self-reflective and better understand our personal realities, as well as gain an insight into the lives and experiences of others. In doing so, we protect and honour **the right of every reader to be visible.**

## References

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/newsEvents/89938.html>

<sup>2</sup>

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/dec/14/schools.uk2>

<sup>3</sup>

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/aug/23/malorie-blackman-teen-young-adult-fiction-diversity-amnesty-teen-takeover-2014>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/apr/10/diversity-in-childrens-books-candy-gourlay-philippines>

*Each article in future editions will showcase the best of children's literature. It is my hope that this will help teachers to make informed decisions about the books they choose, enabling the children in their care to truly see themselves and one another. For further book recommendations sign up to the free CLPE Core Book List at [www.corebooks.org.uk](http://www.corebooks.org.uk)*