MEDIA RELEASE: Embargoed until 00:01 Tuesday 17 July 2018

REFLECTING REALITIES: NEW STUDY CALLS FOR BETTER ETHNIC REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN’S BOOKS

Figures released from ‘Reflecting Realities’, a pioneering new study commissioned by national charity the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), show a significant need for better ethnic representation in children’s literature. Representation is low, the study reveals: of the 91151 children’s books published in the UK in 2017, only 391 - just 4% - featured a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) character.

Initiated by CLPE to evaluate the extent and quality of ethnic representation in children’s publishing and funded by Arts Council England, the first-of-its-kind survey found that the presence of BAME characters in books published in 2017 did not align with the demographic make-up of the UK. Every ethnic minority was significantly under-represented. The Department for Education2 reported in 2017 that 32.1% of pupils of compulsory school age in England were of minority ethnic origins. In stark contrast, the study reveals that the books published in 2017 did not reflect the realities that exist within Britain’s classrooms - only 1% of children’s books had a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic main character and a quarter of the books submitted (99 in total) only featured BAME presence in the form of background characters.

Books intended specifically for a school-based audience defined as ‘Reading Schemes’ made up nearly a third of submissions (29%) which would indicate that an even lower overall proportion – 3.7% as opposed to 4% - of children’s books produced last year were available to wider society through bookshops.

While contemporary realism (books set in modern day landscapes/contexts) accounted for the highest proportion of fiction submissions (56% or 91 titles) and featured the highest percentage of BAME character presence, only 38% of these expressed their thoughts in a meaningful way. Furthermore, over a quarter (26%) of the non-fiction entries were for early years’ readers which raises concerns regarding the availability and quality of BAME presence in non-fiction titles as children move through childhood: fiction and non-fiction currently offers fewer opportunities for children of BAME backgrounds to experience positive and varied representations.

The results of the survey were revealed at a presentation attended by children’s book publishers yesterday in central London. Acknowledging that publishers have already recognised an imbalance in representation, CLPE and the Reflecting Realities steering group presented six key recommendations to further inform and guide investment in broadening representation in children’s literature.

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1 Nielsen Book Data (includes children’s fiction, non-fiction and picture books; does not include comic strips, novelty books, annuals, early learning and reference books)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- BAME characters need to be better represented within children’s literature in general- better reflecting the UK population, not as a tick box exercise but as a meaningful and accurate representation of the interconnected, diverse society within which our children are growing up.
- Content should be balanced, allowing for cultural specificity without reducing characterisations to derogatory stereotypes or a two dimensional shorthand.
- BAME characters need to be well developed and authentically portrayed. They should exist across a range of genres and within both fiction and non-fiction, allowing readers to experience the full spectrum of emotions when enjoying these representations.
- Non-fiction beyond the early years needs to be more representative, ensuring that fully representative texts accompany children at each stage of their development and growth.
- The industry should invest in both established and new authors from a range of backgrounds who are able to paint characters and worlds with the integrity that the subject matter deserves.
- Particular consideration should be given towards making books produced for the ‘gift’ and ‘trade’ markets more representative.

The study will be produced annually and is intended to support publishers to understand the extent to which books mirror the realities of their readership. It is produced alongside research from BookTrust, who will publish a report focusing on the number of children’s titles created by authors and illustrators of colour in the UK over the last decade in September. Both surveys are funded by Arts Council England and aim to promote conversation and awareness around representation in children’s books.

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“When my children see themselves reflected in the books we read with them, it is an affirmation that they can be the main character in their story. That they can save the world from a meteorite and go on a bus trip to visit grandma and own a dog called Timmy. When other people see my children reflected in books, it is an affirmation that they can envisage people who look like my children as the main character in stories. This isn’t so much about reflecting reality but also showing that inclusive stories can help children to see themselves and others as equals, and not just as sidekicks or worse, not even present. This report has shown that while diversity is an important thing for the publishing industry and change is happening and strides are being taken, there is still much work to be done.”

- Nikesh Shukla, author, editor of The Good Immigrant, co-founder of The Good Agency and member of the Reflecting Realities steering committee

“As a children’s bookseller with over 30 years specialising in the provision of diverse children’s books, we know how hard it is to source quality, representative literature for children. And we also know how huge the demand is for diverse titles. Schools are our main buyers- time and time again they come to us, asking for support in finding books which properly reflect both their school communities and the wider communities children are growing up in. This research from the CLPE exposes a cultural poverty at the heart of UK children’s literature: 32% of pupils identify as BAME and yet only 4% of children’s books have a BAME character. This should be of urgent interest to anyone who has a stakehold in engaging all children in literacy. The more our children’s literature reflects all readers, the much greater the opportunities for all children to see the book world as one which embraces and welcomes them. Diverse literature, quite simply, unlocks new readers.”

- Fen Coles, co-director of Letterbox Library, and member of the Reflecting Realities steering committee

THE STEERING COMMITTEE

Dr Kehinde Andrews  Darren Chetty  Dr Fen Coles
Prof. Vini Lander  Louise Johns-Shepherd  Nicky Parker
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NOTES TO EDITORS

Link to download full report: https://clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/research/reflecting-realities

About Reflecting Realities

Reflecting Realities is a pioneering programme to establish the first study into ethnic representation in UK children’s literature. Produced annually, the survey will assess the representation of BAME characters in children’s books published in the UK, with the aim to alter attitudes within publishing and cultural education. The survey is inspired by the model from the Co-operative Children’s Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, which has published data on US children’s books since 1985, and is led by a steering committee of leading experts in publishing and education.

Submissions Criteria

All children’s books first published in the UK in 2017 featuring Black, Asian and minority ethnic characters in fiction, non-fiction and picture book categories with an age range of 3-11 years. CLPE received 381 eligible titles from 40 Publishers.

Analysis

Ethnic categories were drawn from the UK Census categories with appropriate extensions to these definitions to accommodate broader representations of ethnicity in literature. The framework was structured to help the steering committee consider how many BAME characters featured in each book, their position in the narrative, their degree of agency and the quality of the representation both in the text and in illustrations.

About the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education is a charity working with all those involved in teaching literacy in primary schools. Our work raises the achievement of children by helping schools to teach literacy more effectively and showing teachers how quality children’s literature can be placed at the heart of all learning.