CLPE REFLECTING REALITIES Q&A

Background

What is the Reflecting Realities study, and why did you commission it?

We are a long established, trusted charitable organisation that supports all those working with children to develop practices that enable children to become lifelong readers and writers with all the benefits this brings.

We have a rich legacy focused on raising the profile of quality children's literature and making this central to curriculum and wider provision in the Primary Setting. We have always been keen to ensure that the quality of the books we advocate and put in the hands of teachers support children in developing their reader identity and more holistically their sense of self.

We take the responsibility of book recommendation very seriously and we want all stakeholders to be reflective and considered in their book choices. This initiative will enable us to better support all stakeholders in this endeavour.

What was the overall aim?

The overall aim is to annually quantify and evaluate the extent and quality of ethnic representation in children's publishing in the UK. At CLPE we read thousands of books every year and are always reviewing our book provision and our book lists to ensure that we are introducing teachers to the best children's literature. However we still find it difficult to find enough books to add to our collections that are truly and authentically reflections of the wide world in which we live. With this survey, we hope to create a knowledge base from which we can all learn and move forward.

Why now?

Reflections on the inadequate degrees of ethnic minority representation in the output of the publishing industry have garnered a great deal of momentum of late. Our concerns in this regard have been longstanding and so the current spotlight on the matter allows us channel this momentum to help move the conversation forward.

How it works

How did you collect the data?

In the first cycle of this study, we invited all UK publishers of children's literature to submit any titles aimed at children aged 3-11, first published in 2017 that featured black or minority ethnic characters. These books were reviewed and the outcomes of the review formed the basis of the 2018 report. In the second cycle of the study, we invited all publishers of children's literature to submit titles using the same criteria, this time focusing on titles first published in 2018. These submissions were reviewed and the outcomes have formed the basis of our 2019 report.

Who oversaw the submission process?

CLPE oversaw the submissions, counting and analysis process. The books and findings were then presented to the steering committee for review.

Who are the steering committee, and how were they selected?

The steering committee and the project is led by Farrah Serroukh (Programmes Leader at CLPE) and was made up of leaders in their field who are all actively involved in promoting equity in literature, education and wider society. They are:

- Darren Chetty - Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education
- Dr Fen Coles - Co-director of Letterbox Library
- Louise Johns-Shepherd - CLPE Chief Executive
- Professor Vini Lander - Professor of Race and Teacher Education, School of Education, University of Roehampton
- Nicky Parker - Publisher, Amnesty UK Publishing
- Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold - Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in the Department of Information Studies at University College London
- Professor Karen Sands O'Connor - British Academy Global Professor for Children's Literature, SUNY Buffalo State and Newcastle University

What was the selection criteria for the books surveyed?

All children's literature first published in the UK in 2018, including fiction, non-fiction and picture books, for ages 3-11 with at least one BAME character was surveyed.

What were you looking for?

We were looking to review both the extent and quality of Ethnic Minority representation in each title. The Ethnic categories were drawn from the UK Census categories with appropriate extensions to these definitions to accommodate broader representations of ethnicity in literature. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of the Census definitions of ethnicity, we chose to apply these to allow us to draw parallels with the UK population versus the characters who populate the world of books. The framework was designed to help us to 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.

Why not review the extent and quality of representation of other protected characteristics?

We are keen in the first instance to address the particular challenges regarding the lack of ethnic minority representation. We hope to refine, embed and consolidate this framework and process before extending the survey and incorporating additional categories.

Why is this survey exclusively about BAME representation?

We believe that investment in centering all perspectives and realities ultimately lead to better realities for all. This is a starting point, which will enable us to recognise and redress imbalance across all areas.

Don't we already have enough information to hand about representation in children's books?

Historically a number of individuals and organisations have made efforts to challenge the imbalance and quantify the extent of the issue. However there is no instance in which a comprehensive study of this nature has been undertaken or sustained over time in the UK. Having this comparative data available and regularly collecting it in order to build a picture over time will help us to look at how the situation improves and develops. Research tells us that learning to read and write is a social process and reader identity is a key factor in helping children to be successful. It is therefore important that all children in our society are represented in what is available for them to read.

What about the rabbits?

One of the most common questions arising from the first cycle of this work related to why we had not factored in the presence of animals in children's literature – in other words, we were asked why we had not removed the totals for books featuring animals before calculating the totals of books with BAME representation. In the second cycle of reporting, publishers asked us to provide data relating to the proportionate presence of animals in the 2018 output. Consequently, we added the reporting of this information as an additional requirement of this cycle. Publishers self-reported the total number of their books featuring main casts solely comprising animals or inanimate objects published in 2018. The outcome of this is detailed in the report but in short, the self-reported statistics indicate that a reader from a BAME background is much more likely to encounter a book where an animal is the main character than they are to encounter a book which contains a character that shares their ethnicity or cultural heritage.

The results

How many submissions did you receive from publishers?

We received almost 929 submissions from 46 publishers, but not all were eligible. See selection criteria above.

How many books published in 2018 featured BAME characters?

Out of 11,011 children's books published in 2018, only 743 featured BAME characters (7%). Only 4% contained a BAME main character.

What were your conclusions?

The data highlights not only the insufficient degrees of representation but also brings into question the quality of BAME representation in children's literature and how meaningfully such presence values, validates and reflects children's realities.

Did you consult publishers?

We did. In our experience of working with publishers of children's literature, we know that they are passionate about producing quality books for their readership. They have recognised an imbalance in representation and as a result have started to invest time and money towards redressing this. At CLPE, we want to help move the conversation on. We are so grateful to the publishers who have embraced the opportunity to work with us to create a knowledge base from which we can all learn

and move forward.

What has been publishers' response so far?

Publishers have been very supportive and positive about the potential this process has to assist them in fulfilling their commitment to better quality children's literature.

Recommendations

What would you hope to see next year/in the future?

The Publishing Industry has recognised an imbalance in representation and as a result have started to invest time and money towards redressing this. We would hope that by next year's survey, we will start to see the following improvements:

- 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 be central to many narratives and not only dominate in the margins, and they should not be predominantly defined by their struggle, suffering or 'otherness.' 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.
- 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.
- 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.