Plotting Ahead...
Diversity, inclusion and belonging in children’s literature
How can diversity in literature impact outcomes for children and young people

Introduction

At Pearson, we work to empower those working with children, young people and adult learners to explore the different dimensions of literacy, improve outcomes and inspire a life-long love of reading and writing.

We believe that every learner should be equipped with the tools they need to express their ideas and imagination creatively and confidently, in order to become the person they choose to be.

In early 2020, the Pearson Plotting Ahead roundtable series launched its inaugural event. Educators, independent publishers and third sector organisations came together to discuss the existing lack of diversity, inclusion and belonging in children’s literature across the UK.

Since that time, the world has faced one of the greatest challenges in modern times but the collective commitment to Diversity and Inclusion in literature has not wavered.

Hosted by Jaz Ampaw-Farr, a former teacher and motivational coach, alongside speakers Farrah Serroukh, Learning Programme Leader at CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) and James Aidoo, Lead Trainer at Innerscope, Plotting Ahead’s focus was on uniting those who are already working on the issue within their sectors - whether that be through publishing or curating a range of authors and inclusive stories, or through exploring ways to improve their school’s curriculum.

From those already making waves in affecting what we know to be mainstream and in working to increase the range of voices our children are exposed to when reading, to people beginning to join the charge, there was a collective purpose: To identify what we should and could do to improve diversity in literature for children and young people across the UK – as individuals, as organisations and as a nation.
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The Power of Stories

Stories are powerful things. When we read them, we fill in the blanks - what the story didn't say, what we assumed and what we imagined taking place. Stories empower us to do this. They empower us to dream and to understand the minds of others.

But just imagine if you were able to hear the narrative of a story but not conceive that it could be you, to assume that the person in it doesn't look like you or think like you or relate to you in any way. Could you fill in the blanks in the same way? Could you imagine? Could you dream? Would you be angry that you couldn't relate to it? Would you be frustrated that you were forced to pretend to buy into it? Would you feel embarrassed or rejected? Would you feel judged or not normal?

Books and stories open up the world. They help establish and embed relationships, empathy and conversation. Stories are the key to progress.

When it comes to children’s literature, stories have the power to influence, to teach, to inform, to create ideas, to set you up for success, and if these stories don’t indicate a belonging of some sort, then there is always this question, ‘is that really for me?’ or ‘is that for other people who aren’t like me?’

Jaz Ampaw-Farr
International Speaker, Author, TV Presenter and Resilience Ninja

We’re looking at books and we just simply can’t find the books that reflect the population of the classrooms within which our teachers are teaching.

Louise Johns-Shepherd
Chief Executive CLPE

At Pearson, our main mission is to help every child make progress in their lives through learning. Children can’t do that unless they have a love of reading and they want to engage with reading and I think that making sure children can see themselves in the books they are reading is a really important thing that we need to try to achieve and I think we have lots of opportunity as Pearson, in all the work that we do, to really make a difference.

Sharon Hague
Senior Vice President, Pearson
The Importance of diversity in literature

Diversity, inclusion and belonging matter. They matter in the literature we consume and the books, poetry and plays we put in front of our young people. The impact of this can last a lifetime.

Research shows that diversity in the classroom builds better thinkers, improves academic outcomes, increases tolerance, builds stronger communities, develops successful employees and ultimately leads to a happier life.¹

Diversity, by definition is: “including many different types of people or things”. It goes beyond colour and ethnic backgrounds. It includes customs, cultural and religious experiences, disabilities, political views, gender, sexual orientation, and more. Classrooms are also diversifying, moving online and providing a greater choice of channels for accessing content and increasing the visibility of a wider range of cultures and influences, with online learning platforms and social media as two key examples.

It is increasingly important that students in our schools are exposed to literature from a variety of authors from different backgrounds and experiences and are reading about contemporary issues that they can engage with and relate to. Young people should feel represented in the literature they read and by the authors who write for them.

Despite this importance, Sarah Crowne, ACE Director for Literacy believes that there is a “paucity of high-quality books for children and young adults by and about people from all walks of life”.

Literature has an important part to play in normalizing and celebrating presence but the volume and quantity of what is out there is concerning.

The stark reality of the lack of diversity in literacy, and the consequences of this, were the inspiration for bringing so many people together. Statistics by Farrah Serroukh from CLPE as well as the Time for Change report and delegate insights reinforced the belief that we collectively need to drive forward improvements across the education landscape.

Diversity in literacy, the statistics

Diversity in literacy:
- In 2018, more children's books that featured an animal main character were published than children's books featuring a Black, Latin, Indigenous or Asian Child.²
- LGBTQ+ books for kids and teens account for a very small portion of the overall industry.³
- White people read more books than other demographics.⁴
- A large body of children's books gives “subliminal or frankly negative messages” about the supposed nature of people with disabilities.⁵
- 32.7% of children and young people in the UK aged 9 to 18 say that they don't see themselves in what they read, and 39.8% would like more books with characters who are similar to them.⁶
- More children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds than White backgrounds say that they don't see themselves in what they read (40% vs. 30.5%). This is particularly true for children and young people from Black ethnic backgrounds.⁶

UK statistics – Centre for Literacy in Primary Education Reflecting realities report.⁷
- The number of children's books published in the UK over the last three years (2017-19) featuring characters from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background has increased to 10% in 2019, rising from 4% in 2017, 7% in 2018 to 10% in 2019, despite 33.5% of the UK primary school population coming from a minority ethnic background.
- There is still a long way to go to achieve representation that reflects the UK population.

Key findings: representations of people of colour among children's book creators.⁸
- Between 2007 and 2017, white children's book creators had around twice as many books published compared to creators of colour: approximately four books in comparison to approximately 2 books.
- Between 2007 and 2017, 8.62% of children's book creators were people of colour and they created 4.98% of unique titles.
- Between 2007 and 2017, 1.96% of children's book creators were British people of colour and they created 1.16% of unique titles.

Inequality of access, perceptions of a limited market, a lack of role models, a lack of experience and investment and concern over authenticity are just some of the issues identified by a report for Arts Council England in November 2019.⁹

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⁴ https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/19/slightly-fewer-americans-are-reading-print-books-new-survey-finds/
⁵ https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3865/3644
A desire for change

Whilst the statistics speak for themselves, the issue and debate around diversity in literature – and the wider issue of diversity in education – is unfortunately not new.

The effects of reading for pleasure stretch far beyond education. The personal, cognitive, social and emotional benefits mean that we can literally save lives through literacy and yet, the 2015 National Curriculum contained no ethnic representation or any guidance.

It’s easy to see why students drop off at an early age – because we often don’t appreciate the value of literacy until much later in life.

It isn’t however an easy fix. Achieving inclusion is a complicated endeavour and the time and promotion needed isn’t small. It’s not just about having the right things available, of the right quality; it’s about how they are used and how we ensure a balanced, rich diet of literature that can broaden perspectives.

It’s taken 50 years, but society is finally recognising the need for change. The figures, trends and patterns that have emerged have begun to infiltrate our collective consciousness and together, we can drive forward improvements.

“**In a post-911 world, there has never been a stronger reason than all the things that are happening, to try and show students that they are members of a global society.**

**As much as I loved the books that I experienced at school, I recognised that I didn't really see myself in those books and I certainly didn't know very much about the world.**

**Bennie Kara**
Assistant Headteacher,
Westminster City School
Plotting Ahead... aspirations for diversity in literacy

The Plotting Ahead 2020 roundtable identified the following 10 aspirations for the future of diversity in literacy. We will:

1. **Change the mindset** at all ages and stages so that diverse is not different and inclusive books are normal not niche
2. **Equip our educators** with the ability to experience a diverse curriculum themselves, particularly in teacher training, and give them the space to critically think and question
3. **Develop books** around knowledge, writers and scholars of differing ability, ethnicity, gender, sexual and religious orientation
4. Invite distributors to the **conversation and challenge** them to put an inclusive range of texts on display
5. Encourage publishers to be **ethical leaders** and show the amazing illustrations, stories and writers from all walks of life
6. Get our **communities to care** and get behind diverse writers with their voices
7. Demand **quality in all texts** – the palette, language choice and positive portrayal through care and small details. It can be done well, let’s ensure it is!
8. Understand that these **changes take time and effort**. We need to carve out time and resources to plan, implement and maintain change in schools, organisations, communities and beyond
9. Work together to ensure the opportunity doesn’t pass us by and commit to making changes, no matter how small. Ground up and top down, collectively, each tiny change can make a big impact
10. Remember that **inclusivity means including all those people** who may feel excluded or marginalised - BAME, LGBTQ, those with special educational needs, those with disabilities, those with higher learning potential and more. All religions. All shapes and sizes. All people.

"It's the actions that we're going to take that are going to be sustainable and supported through our society that's really going to drive the change and change the experiences that future generations are able to have."

**Allana Gay**
Headteacher and Co-founder, BAMEed
Affecting change

Change cannot happen in isolation. Outside of schools, there is a vast community of allies that are required to work together to enable and enact change. Parents/carers, schools, teacher trainers, publishers, librarians, the DfE, Ofqual and many more, need to work together from both within their organisations and communities, and without, to implement structural and sustained change. For example:

- **LEADERS**: It is vital that those leading our education system not only support change, but also set a standard. We need to assess and agree what we want to see happen, by when and at what level. Are we measuring diversity by percentages or perceptions? What impact needs to be felt on a personal, cultural and societal level for us to deem this successful?

- **NQTS**: Those coming into teaching have the power and the desire to instill change. That desire should be met with acceptance from within the sector and a willingness to try something new

- **LIBRARIANS**: Librarians are integral to the curation of what will ignite passion – something that is often put on the teacher. Librarians should be invited to contribute, to recommend and source texts of interest to the children and young people within their schools and communities

- **COMMUNITY MEMBERS**: Societally we need to celebrate and embrace change. We need to accept and support all positive steps forward, no matter how small, whilst accepting that there is always more that can be done

- **INDIVIDUALS**: As individuals, we need to make informed choices about what we choose to read and the gifts that we as parents, grandparents, friends and/or peers etc. choose to buy for ourselves and for children

- **OTHERS**: Other gatekeepers are also responsible for variety and access. Publishers for what they commission and distributors for what they sell etc.

Collectively, we need to be positive disruptors. We need to be brave enough to ask questions, share information and not be afraid to get it wrong.

Be curious. Stay neutral.
Every child wants to see themselves reflected in education and every child wants to see themselves reflected in literature. So the reality is, because we now exist in a global context as opposed to just in a UK bubble, our children need to have an exposure that will allow them to navigate that global context really well.

Books and literature are the key to that. They make sure that our children have interactions and are able to use their imaginations to understand different cultures, understand different settings and understand different societies without even having to leave their living room.

Literature is one of the ways that we start that. We begin by changing the books that our children read, we look at the illustrations that they interact with, we look at the quality of the content that they get to interact with. They get to understand different cultures and it prepares them to be global citizens.

Allana Gay
Headteacher and Co-founder, BAMEed

The world is forever changing. I think there is a variety of cultures, a variety of backgrounds that are continuously being represented in the workplace and in our localities, in our communities, so being able to grapple with some of these differences and have language to navigate some of these conversations, I think is really, really important.

I would love to see illustrations that accentuate the vibrancy of a variety of cultures as opposed to maybe a monolithic perspective.

James Aidoo
Founder, Innerscope

We always think about ‘what can everyone else do? Our bodies should do this, our government should do this. Actually the government, bodies, publishers, they are made up of individuals, so our real question is, ‘what can we do?’

Jaz Ampaw-Farr
A change from within

We know that one discussion is not enough, that one change is not enough, or one promise of more, which is why at Pearson, we are committed to working with educators, third sector organisations, parents, children and young people and all those working in the education sector, to continuously improve.

As the first awarding organisation to ensure over 25% of our GCSE English Literature texts are written by authors from ethnic minority backgrounds, we remain committed to implementing a range of measures to maximise all areas of diversity in curriculum.

We have joined forces with the UK’s largest book publisher, Penguin Random House and leading race equality think tank, The Runnymede Trust to ensure English literature better reflects contemporary culture and society, to increase understanding around racial equality and to give students access to a diverse range of authors and books as part of Lit in Colour.

Lit in Colour.
Taking things forward

Following the *Plotting Ahead* roundtable in January, Pearson attendees covering the Primary, Secondary and Qualifications areas within the UK Schools division formed a working group to identify and execute a list of actions that had been inspired by what we heard during the event.

Below is an outline of the actions we gave ourselves and what you can expect from Pearson in the future:

1. A comprehensive review of Primary and Secondary titles
2. A commitment to remove titles we feel no longer align with our present values
3. The introduction of additional support for schools teaching our new GCSE (9-1) English Literature text additions including events, online training, schemes of work and more
4. Annual Diversity in Literature Conference for students and teachers
5. Bug Club Shared Reading – a series of engaging stories with diversity and inclusion at their heart with accessible for all British Sign Language storytime videos
6. New publishing that implements our updated editorial guidelines driven by our Employee Resource Groups: Women in Learning & Leadership (WILL), Able, Spectrum and People Representing the Interest of Minority Ethnicities (PRIME). [Learn more](#)
8. Launch of our Diverse Images Project to review and improve our guidance for internal and external designers and our image library choice, search terms and tagging
9. Championing of our Roundtable delegates’ amazing work through our Projects Beyond Pearson site
10. New partnerships and collaborations with other organisations in order to increase our impact in improving the diversity and inclusion of literature for young readers

We are also working closely with other colleagues across the UK Schools team to ensure diversity and inclusion are embedded throughout all our resources and qualifications. A key example of this is our new Migration topic for GCSE (9-1) History for first teaching in 2021.

As part of our commitment to fighting systemic racism and creating bias-free content that reflects the diversity of all learners, we have recently launched the [Pearson Reporting Bias form](#) to ensure that students, teachers and parents have a way of getting in touch and feeding back to us if they come across anything that they feel lacks diversity, perpetuates stereotypes, or presents any bias.
We play an important role in ensuring that our education materials provide aspiration, inspiration and inclusivity throughout the curriculum. But we’re just one voice. We are one voice in the whole eco-system of this important topic of discussion and we can play a big role, but we can’t play the only role. We have to work with the community, we have to work with teachers, trusts, government, book sellers, publishers. We all have to play a role, and this is an opportunity to begin that dialogue and from there, hopefully, we can continue the conversation.

**Vanessa Wright**
Vice President, Sales and Marketing, UK Schools, Pearson

We should be even braver in what we are trying to achieve. I think we should be setting ourselves more ambitious goals. We’ve really got to be brave about leading this debate and making change. We will get challenged for it, but it is absolutely the right thing to do.

**Sharon Hague**
Senior Vice President, Pearson

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**Further information**

**Reports of interest**

- Reflecting Realities: Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children’s Literature 2018, 2019, 2020, CLPE
- Time for Change: Black and minority ethnics representation in the children’s literature sector, November 2019, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University
- Missing Pages: increasing racial diversity in the literature we teach 2020, Teach First
Thank you to our Roundtable 2020 Attendees

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From Pearson:
Organised by Kirsty Smith and Louis Stewart.
Join the conversation

Visit our #DiversityinLit website to find out more about our amazing attendees
Watch highlights from the day on YouTube at Pearson UK Educators
Join the conversation on Twitter @PearsonSchools #DiversityInLit