

Time for Change

What does the available literature tell us about the representation of people from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds in the UK children's literature sector?

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**Sheffield
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Introduction

This document summarises the available evidence on the representation of people from BME backgrounds in the UK children's literature sector published within the last five years. We are interested in existing evidence on BME representation in terms of artistic products (such as main characters and content in books for children and young adults), artist and wider sector workforce, and by inference the actual market and audiences.

We recognise that discussions of diversity can apply to a range of characteristics, including gender, disability, socioeconomic background, LGBTQ+, and that intersectionality exists across different aspects of diversity. Whilst this review primarily discusses diversity in terms of ethnicity (as this is the focus of the current research), other elements of diversity are considered where relevant and possible within the scope of the research.

Following this review of existing literature, we conducted an online survey and in-depth interviews with individuals and organisations in other areas of the sector who influence diversity in children's literature. This included gaining feedback from across mainstream and independent publishing, education, libraries, bookselling, charities and membership organisations. This part of the research aimed to find out more about the barriers faced by BME authors and illustrators, how the sector is supporting and promoting equality and diversity, and what more could be done to address underrepresentation in the sector.

The results from the survey and interviews are reported here: www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/diversity-children's-literature-report-2019

Terminology

Different terms are used across the sector to describe people of minority ethnicities, including people of colour, black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) and black and minority ethnic (BME). The terms used in this document mirror those used in the reports or articles that they refer to. The term BME is used by the commissioners, Arts Council England, so this term will be used in this research more generally.

Representation of BME people in the children's literature sector

Overview

Recent research has demonstrated that people from BME backgrounds are poorly represented across the children's literature sector in the UK in terms of:

- the workforce of the children's literature sector;
- published authors and illustrators;
- the content of children's and young adult (YA) books.

Workforce of the children's literature sector

People from BME backgrounds are underrepresented across the workforce of the creative industry as a whole. Creative & Cultural Skills (a Sector Skills Council) commissioned an analysis of the Creative and Cultural workforce in 2018 and found that BAME people represented just 9% of people working in creative industries, despite making up 12% of the UK workforce as a whole.

More specifically, research shows that people from BAME backgrounds are underrepresented in the workforce of the publishing industry. A 2017 survey of the publishing workforce (administered by bookcareers.com), found that only 9.6% of respondents were not white British, and this figure has increased only marginally since 2008, when 9.3% of respondents were not white British. Similarly, in a survey involving 42 publishing houses in the UK commissioned by the Publishers Association, 11.6% of the workforce was reported to be BAME. This is lower than the UK population (14%) and much lower than the London population (40%), where almost two thirds of respondents were based (Equal Approach 2018). In response, the

Publishers Association has committed to conducting an annual industry-wide survey annually for five years to monitor changes in the industry, as part of its action plan to address this lack of diversity.¹

This lack of ethnic diversity is even more pronounced for professions in libraries and information services. Research commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the Archives Records Association (UK and Ireland) (ARA) in 2015 found that 97% of the UK Information sector workforce was white.

A survey of people entering publishing through Creative Access, a training and employment provider, highlights the experiences and aspirations of BAME professionals in publishing who entered through the programme. Of the 66 respondents, 24% said their placement put them off working in the sector, while 18% had since left the book trade all together. A third said they had found it difficult to progress in the profession. The results paint a mixed picture of how the respondents perceived the industry's attitude towards diversity. Over half of the respondents (55%) did not feel the industry was open or welcoming towards people from different backgrounds, and a further 45% said they had not seen an improvement in diversity since they started working in publishing (Chandler 2019).

¹ <https://www.publishers.org.uk/news/releases/2017/pa-launches-10-point-inclusivity-action-plan/>

These examples from individual organisations and national data demonstrate both the lack of diversity in the workforce and a culture of inaccessibility for the BME workforce within these spaces.

Authors and illustrators

Research commissioned by BookTrust reviewed children's/YA books published between 2007 and 2017 in the UK. This research provides large-scale quantified evidence which highlights the underrepresentation of children's authors and illustrators of colour (referred to collectively as 'creators of colour' in the report). In 2017, only 5.58% of children's book creators were people of colour, and only 1.98% were British people of colour, which is much lower than the proportion of BAME people in the working age population of England (16%). The proportion of children's authors and illustrators of colour published in the UK has increased only slightly from 3.99% in 2007 to 5.58% in 2017 (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019).

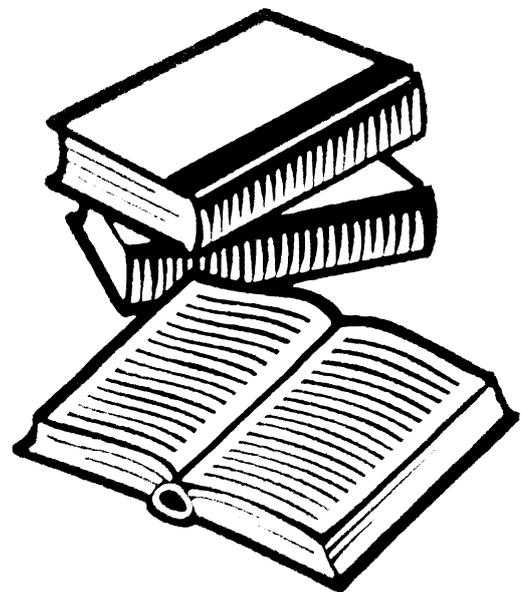
The dearth of BME authors and illustrators for children has been a longstanding issue that is now receiving more attention, but it is likely to have longer lasting implications as young readers grow into adults with few writers of colour to choose from. A 2017 Ipsos MORI public opinion poll on Literature in Britain today, commissioned by the Royal Society of Literature found that of the 400 writers named by the public as writers of literature, just 7% identified as black, Asian or mixed race. The poll also found that fewer readers of literature were from BAME backgrounds, reflecting the social exclusion and under-representation of ethnic minorities in books and readership (RSL 2017). It also suggests the possible lifelong consequences of a sector that does not reflect, engage or cater for a significant proportion of adult readers from BAME backgrounds.

However, as Lovegrove (2018) points out, the strong sales of books such as Afua Hirsch's *Brit(ish)*, Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, *Black and British* by David Olusoga 'have shown that there is a huge appetite for books that challenge, inspire and inform' – and the same is likely to be true for more diverse children's books (Chetty and Sands-O'Connor 2019). According to Spread The Word's

report, there is a business case for having more writers of colour on our bookshelves, as BAME communities are reported to represent £300 million of disposable income (Kean, 2015), again with likely implications for the purchasing of books for children. Jerome (2019), for example highlights that one recently published book by Rochelle Humes about a mixed race girl with curly hair sold out online within days and the first print run in less than a month – indicating the demand for inclusive children's books is there.

Additional research by Ramdarshan Bold (2018) further explored the impacts and connections between the childhood reading habits and influences on British BAME YA authors, in terms of the construction of racialised author and reader identities. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with a sample of authors, she examined the experiences of 'own voice' writers that create a counter-narrative, as well as the output and experiences of British YA BAME authors published in the UK between 2006-2016.

Sands-O'Connor (2017) takes a wider historical perspective, tracing the history of children's publishing through the changing contexts and experiences of Black British authors and publishing. From colonialism, to post war education, the impact of the Black empowerment movement in publishing in the 1960s-80s, multicultural education in the 1980s-90s, independent publishing since the 1990s, and institutional racism and prizes and awards – each phase highlighting the structural forces that have led to the current dearth of representation.



Content of children's and YA books

The first UK study of diversity in children's books was published by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) in July 2018. It found that despite 32% of UK school-age children being from a minority ethnic background, only 4% of children's/YA books published in 2017 in the UK featured BAME characters, and only 1% had a BAME main character. The research found that BAME presence was even lower for particular genres and age groups, e.g. in non-fiction books for older children.

In terms of content, over half the fiction books with BAME characters focused on social justice or contemporary realism, and only one of the books submitted was defined as comedy. Over a quarter of the non-fiction books were targeted at early years, with very few aimed at 7-12-year olds. CLPE published their second report in September 2019, which tracked the changes by quantifying the extent and evaluating the quality of ethnic representation in UK children's literature published in 2018 (CLPE, 2019).

An analysis of the top 100 bestselling illustrated children's books of 2018 (using data from Nielsen BookScan) also found that collectively, the most popular picture books published that year presented to children a world dominated by white and male characters (Ferguson 2019). Picture books featured very few BAME characters and the 2018 analysis found that there were even fewer girls and non-white characters, compared to analysis conducted the previous year. Annual data collection and analysis of this kind has raised awareness of the limited progress that has been made in terms of reflecting the diverse lives of children in the books published.

Barriers to improving diversity

Despite activity (including campaigns, programmes and initiatives) across the sector, people from BME backgrounds continue to be underrepresented in children's literature. Previous research has highlighted the complex factors and systemic inequalities influencing this lack of diversity. Recently published research commissioned by BookTrust suggests that people of colour are underrepresented in children's literature as a result of a negative cycle beginning in childhood. Because children from BME backgrounds do not see people of colour in books or in the industry, they are less likely to be aware of, or aspire to, careers in children's literature. If they do pursue a career in the sector, evidence shows that they are likely to face more barriers in accessing these roles and may face greater challenges in career progression or continuing publication (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). Children's literature plays a role in facilitating important conversations and encourages people to explore how systems of meaning and power affect the lives they lead (Leland et al, 2017). When children from BME backgrounds are unable to see themselves in the literature, it reiterates a historic and systemic message about systems of meaning and power (Sands-O'Connor, 2017).

The main barriers identified in the reviewed literature are described in more detail below.

Quality and authenticity of representation

As described in the previous section, research has shown that people from BME backgrounds continue to be underrepresented across the children's literature sector. As well as the overall level of representation of BME people across the sector,

concerns have also been raised about the quality and authenticity of this representation. For example, authors and illustrators from BAME backgrounds have reported being expected to portray a limited view of their cultures and make changes to their storylines and characters based on stereotypical expectations and perceptions and a lack of cultural awareness by agents and editors. Authors felt that greater BAME representation amongst agents and editors would help to address these issues (Writing the Future, 2015).

Concerns over quality of representation were also noted in CLPE's Reflecting Realities research which found that the representation of BAME characters in children's books was higher for books focusing on issues such as social justice (10% of all submitted books), compared with only one comedy title featuring a BAME character. The authors argued that whilst it is important that experiences of suffering and inequality are reflected, it is problematic if these are the only ways in which characters from BAME backgrounds are represented in literature (CLPE, 2018).

Creators of colour interviewed for BookTrust's research echoed these views describing experiences of feeling pigeonholed, with publishers encouraging them to focus their stories on their ethnicity, religion or cultural background, or white creators highlighting issues of racism or immigration when creating books about people of colour (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). Similarly, BAME writers reported that they were often expected to write about 'topical' or highly publicised issues related to race, which may lead to them becoming a 'commenter' on their race, rather than a creator. BAME writers also expressed frustration at feeling expected to represent their race, rather than having

freedom to write stories on topics of their own choosing (Writing the Future, 2015).

One author interviewed for BookTrust highlighted the importance of all children, including those from non-BME backgrounds, seeing diverse characters in books in order to make diversity “normal and embedded so when these kids go and see this in books, it’s not strange.” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). An author interviewed for Writing the Future (2015) felt that white authors should also take more responsibility for improving representation of BAME characters in books, highlighting the fact that stories do not need to focus on ‘issues’ of race and ethnicity, but just need to include realistic characters.

Aspiration

Authentic and high-quality representation in terms of the content of children’s books is crucial in inspiring children from BME backgrounds. If children do not see themselves represented in books, they are less likely to develop a love of reading as a result of not seeing reading, writing and illustrating as something which is ‘for them’ (Koss, 2015). Similarly, while most authors and illustrators interviewed for BookTrust’s research did not remember characters of colour in the books they had read as children, those who did reported that this was important in inspiring their future careers (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019).

A lack of role models in terms of authors and illustrators from BME backgrounds was also described as being one of the main barriers for creators of colour in BookTrust’s research. Only two out of the 15 authors interviewed could remember having read a book by an author or illustrator of colour as a child, unless it had been specifically imported by their parents. Many authors also described experiencing a lack of awareness of the possibility of becoming an author or illustrator or feeling that this was not a career available to them, because they did not see authors and illustrators of colour when they were growing up. (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019).

Access and sustainability

Socioeconomic factors are an important barrier in accessing careers in the children’s literature sector. Income from authorship is often unpredictable and

insufficient to live on, and routes into other roles in the sector, such as publishing, are often via unpaid internships. This means that those with lower economic status, who are not able to access other financial support or supplement their income, cannot realistically access these opportunities (Writing the Future, 2015). This is an issue which is likely to affect people from BME backgrounds to a greater extent due to intersectionality between ethnicity and socioeconomic factors (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). If people from poorer economic backgrounds do manage to access a career in the sector in spite of these barriers, evidence suggests that they may face ongoing challenges in terms of navigating these cultural spaces due to invisible and entrenched class-based issues (Writing the Future, 2015). Authors and illustrators of colour have cited the predominantly white middle-class workforce of the sector as a challenge in accessing and navigating the publishing process, e.g. in finding an agent or with the editorial process. Further evidence that creators of colour face ongoing barriers in sustaining a career and continued publication is highlighted by research that found that creators of colour published an average of approximately two books between 2007 and 2017, compared to white creators who had around four books published on average (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019).

There is a particular lack of representation of BAME people at senior management level in the industry, perhaps due to the fact that initiatives supporting access to careers in the sector tend to be focused on entry level roles via paid internships (Writing the Future, 2015). Creators of colour have expressed a desire to see a more diverse workforce, particularly at a higher level (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). This suggests that longer-term initiatives supporting career progression may be beneficial in improving diversity across the sector.

Tokenism is also felt to be a barrier for authors and illustrators during the publishing process. Two authors interviewed for BookTrust’s research described how there appears to be limited ‘space’ for authors of colour, whilst others voiced concerns about whether their inclusion on awards shortlists or for particular titles was tokenistic (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). Similarly, many BAME authors described publicity campaigns being focused on their ethnicity rather than universal aspects of their books (Writing the Future, 2015), and feeling that they had to ‘perform their otherness while promoting their books’ (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019).

Promoting and increasing diversity in the sector

CLPE (2018: pg9) sum up the importance of improving representation and diversity in children's books (and more widely) as follows:

“ Every child is entitled to feel safe and valued. In the current socio-political and economic climate, the risk of marginalisation of minority groups is heightened. If in their formative years, children do not see their realities reflected in the world around them or only see problematic representations mirrored back at them, the impact can be tremendously damaging. ”

In order to address the underrepresentation of people from BME backgrounds in the children's literature sector and bring about positive sector-wide change, it is important to understand what works and why in terms of improving diversity.

Programmes and initiatives (particularly including engagement with children and young people)

There are a range of initiatives, programmes and businesses (including small specialist publishers, booksellers and grassroots projects) aiming to promote or encourage diversity in children's literature. Examples include Book Love – a travelling carnival of multicultural children's books; Seven Stories and Diverse Voices events to address the issue of underrepresentation in the sector.

Additionally, collaboration projects have focused on connecting authors, illustrators and publishers with children and young people, e.g. BookTrust, Speaking Volumes and Pop Up Projects with initiatives such as Breaking New Ground – a catalogue of children's authors and illustrators of

colour to enable schools and libraries to access diverse creators. Other initiatives have aimed to inspire potential authors and illustrators of the future, and create books that are reflective of diversity. For example, the Publishers Association and the Independent Publishers Guild have been instrumental in setting up EQUIP – a membership organisation to promote inclusivity and access to opportunities in the sector. Publishers have also launched programmes to find, mentor and publish books by writers from underrepresented groups, a key leader in this area is Penguin Random House's WriteNow programme, that has set targets for the workforce and authors to reflect UK society by 2025.

Prizes and Awards

Pearson et al (2019) explored the role prizes have had in increasing, however slightly, the visibility of BAME children's writers. This has been linked, in part, to Malorie Blackman's appointment as Children's Laureate from 2013–15 and the introduction of new, more diversity orientated prizes and awards. These included the Other Award, Jhalak Prize and The Little Rebels Children's Book Award, with the inclusion of BAME members on judging panels. They argue that books shortlisted for these awards and prizes have helped to a limited extent, to raise the profile of diversity in children's literature over the last decade. However, following criticism that the 2017 Carnegie Medal longlist included no books by BAME authors (Squires, 2017; Chetty and Sands-O'Connor, 2019), CILIP initiated a review of their Carnegie and Kate Greenaway children's book awards. The 2019 winning author was Elizabeth Acevedo, a Dominican-American former English teacher, whose book *Post X* was written in verse 'to create space for forgotten or

marginalised voices and words'.² Although the book was inspired by the need for American students in her class to read about characters that reflected their experiences, the UK's oldest book award for children and young adults has yet to be won by a BME author reflecting the ethnically diverse lives of British children (Sands-O'Connor, 2019).

School and library visits

Other factors which were felt to support people from BME backgrounds included school and library visits. Creators of colour interviewed for BookTrust's research who had experienced a school or library visit from an author of colour as a child described how inspiring this was and felt a sense of responsibility to be a role model and inspire the next generation of authors and illustrators. One creator described fully realising the importance of children having role models of authors and illustrators of colour through seeing the responses of children of colour to her school visits saying: "You can see their faces light up with possibility". (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019).

Support from more established authors and illustrators

Support from other creators of colour, either indirectly (through having paved the way), or directly (through mentoring support), was felt to be extremely valuable for creators of colour, particularly earlier in their careers (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). Social media movements have also helped to raise issues around the inclusion of diverse characters and authors in children's literature. For example, YA author Corinne Duyvis's #OwnVoices twitter hashtag that started in September 2015, and later #ReflectingRealities following the CLPE report, have increased awareness, coalesced attention and steered the conversation in positive directions for authors and characters from BME backgrounds.

Alternative routes into publishing

Smaller independent publishers or self-publishing have also offered underrepresented groups alternative routes into publishing. Creators of colour published in the UK between 2007 and

2017 were more likely to have self-published than white creators (15% compared to 7% of unique titles respectively). Creators of colour were also less likely than white creators to have published their books with conglomerates (34% compared to 47% respectively) (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). The success of smaller independent publishers with a focus on diversity (e.g. Knights Of, Lantana, etc.) have highlighted the need for this route into publishing for authors and illustrators from non-white backgrounds. Similarly, booksellers with a focus on representation support authors and illustrators from BME backgrounds to ensure their books are available and accessible (e.g. Tales on Moon Lane, Happy to BMe). Evidence from the US suggests that the marked rise in diverse representation in American children's publishing is attributable to the growth of specialist imprints and independent publishers raising awareness and championing diverse authors. Social media has kept the focus high and booksellers have realised that increasing demand leads to strong sales (Flood, 2019).

Building on the Writing the Future 2015 report, new research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council is currently underway, investigating how writers of colour experience the different stages of the publishing process. This aims to identify the factors operating and decisions made by literary agents, managing directors, editors, designers, marketing and PR personnel, sales and retail staff that can either enable or hinder diversity across all genres (Saha, 2019). This promises to offer a deeper understanding of the positive changes, issues and important learning from and for the sector, moving forwards.



² https://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/press.php?release=pres_2019_winners_announcement.html

Conclusion

The literature reviewed informed the questions that were addressed in the follow-up survey and interviews with individuals and organisations across the children's literature sector. Much of the literature reviewed refers to previous periods of momentum and focus on improving diversity, which, despite commitments, have failed to achieve long-lasting change (e.g. Spread the Word, 2015; Hope, 2017). This highlighted the need for recommendations and actions from the surveys and interviews to be practical and meaningful, and to result in long-term commitment and collaboration across the sector.

This research also adds to the growing evidence base by exploring the perceptions and experiences of a wide range of individuals across the sector, including publishers, booksellers, librarians, agents, authors and illustrators. Gaining feedback from those who can influence diversity across the sector, those who understand the barriers and enablers to improving diversity, and those who have had direct experience of these barriers and enablers, is particularly valuable in fully understanding what works in improving diversity and what can hinder this.



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