



# Reflecting Realities in children's literature: my reality and fictional reality

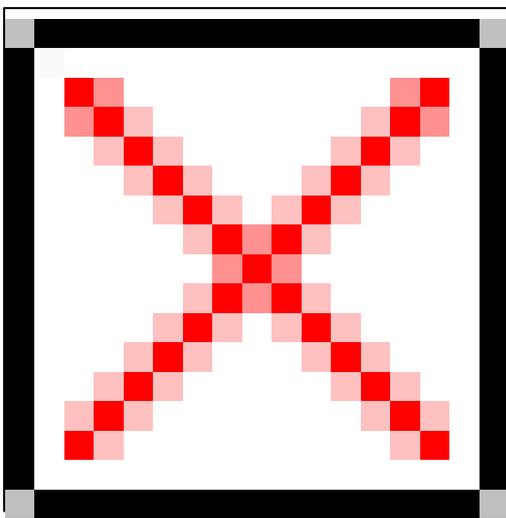
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231 [2]

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**Professor Vini Lander** reports on **Reflecting Realities**, the new study into ethnic representation in children's literature, and draws on her own personal experiences.



CLPE have just announced the findings of **Reflecting Realities**, a new study into ethnic representation in children's literature. Funded by the Arts Council, the study aims to quantify and evaluate the extent and quality of ethnic representation in children's publishing in the UK and involved processing submissions of all children's literature published in the UK that featured Black or minority ethnic (BAME) characters to determine to what extent they were represented.

**Professor Vini Lander** of **University of Roehampton School of Education** sat on the steering committee for **Reflecting Realities**, and writes on the report's findings.

Gone are the days of children's books such as **Janet and John** (some readers will be far too young to remember these books and will have no idea what I am talking about), or so we thought. However, that may not entirely be the case in the world of children's books in twenty-first century Britain. Books such as **Janet and John** were reading books used in schools in the late 1960s and 1970s. They depicted a clean, happy and stable nuclear White middle-class family with mother, father, son and daughter (oh and a dog) engaged in gender stereotypical activities. They conveyed explicit and implicit messages of how to conduct yourself and live your life. Of course, they depicted an ideal life which was far removed from the realities of many people's lives.

I came to England as an immigrant when I was a small child aged six. Life in England was very different from East Africa. I was a prolific reader so **Janet and John**, and other Ladybird Books formed the basis of my extensive reading diet. Indeed, my education involved reading books where all the main protagonists were White and middle class. At that time, as a child fiction reflected reality, a White reality but it wasn't my reality. I could only dream of a reality without daily encounters with racism in the playground or on my way home from school. The internal misery of those demeaning acts led me to dream of what life would be like as a White girl! What would it be like to be the hero in a book? Can heroes in books look like me? Surely, it would be so much easier for me to navigate my way through the

world if I were White? It was only as I became older that I realised these reading books and fiction texts were just that, namely fiction. They portrayed ways of being which did not chime with my life. At first that made me angry but later it formed the sparks of my career trajectory, a life's work to educate teachers to redress educational inequity through pedagogy based on social justice. I challenge them to reflect the reality of the society we live in within their classrooms regardless of where their classrooms are sited, whether they be in multi-ethnic London schools or one less ethnically diverse in Cornwall.

In some ways, we've moved a long way from Janet and John and yet not so far in other respects. The recent survey conducted by the **Centre Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)**, 'Reflecting Realities Survey of Ethnic representation within UK Children's Literature 2017' has revealed that **only 4%** of children's books published **in 2017** featured characters from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. This certainly does not reflect the reality of the UK population nor the ethnic make-up of our primary classrooms. Firstly, the 2011 Census demonstrated the multicultural nature of British society. It noted that the fastest growing proportion of the population were people of mixed ethnic heritages, for example White-Asian; or White- Caribbean. We also know that 32% of the school population in England is from BAME groups yet the majority of teachers are White. Yet this real ethnic diversity is not sufficiently well represented in children's literature. **Only 1%** of the children's books published **in 2017** (the twenty-first century) portrayed a BAME main character. What do these statistics convey? Namely that despite the ethnic diversity within schools and society this diversity does not seem to reflect in the reality of the predominantly white authors who write children's fiction or those who publish it. Why is this?

The survey indicates a good level of presence of BAME characters in non-fiction texts targeted at the Early Years age group (Birth-5 years old) but the BAME presence appears to fade out in books for older children. This seems perverse to establish positive self-image when BAME children are young and to introduce young children from the majority group to visual representations of ethnic diversity, only to diminish this positive start as children get older. This is when they will encounter racial socialisation which for BAME children may diminish their sense of self-worth and for those from the White majority may introduce deficit narratives of BAME people which may in turn affect their attitudes and actions in later in life. I was not surprised to read that only 159 books featured BAME background characters and that 99 books did not feature a BAME main or secondary character. The featured characters had limited agency. They appeared to be part of the background. That sounds familiar! Whose reality is reflected in these texts?

When I'm teaching I ask student teachers to recognise and think beyond the discourse of whiteness. Whiteness does not relate per se to white people. Whiteness is the socially and politically constructed discourse which defines learned behaviour. It is an ideology based on beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours that results in unequal power and privilege in society. It is a relational position of power which is invisible to those who enjoy its privilege and structural advantages. Such is the power of whiteness it is considered the 'norm', a standard by which the other is measured and graded. Such is the power of whiteness that young Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) children are conditioned to believe they can't possibly be the hero in books, this is a privilege reserved for their White friends. Such is the power of whiteness that BAME children find it difficult to write themselves into powerful roles within their own story writing. Such is the power of whiteness it contains the ambitions of aspiring BAME children who may want to be writers one day. Thus, the power of whiteness contains the other within the boundaries it implicitly determines for them, be that through educational expectations, educational structures or books. Books are powerful, they can be the conduit to open up the world to all children and writers and publishers have a duty to our children to reflect all their realities in books which affirm, educate and encourage all children to dream they can be the hero.

**Professor Vini Lander (University of Roehampton, School of Education)**, is one of a panel of leading experts in publishing and education who sat on the steering committee for 'Reflecting Realities'.

'Reflecting Realities' is a pioneering programme to establish the first study into ethnic representation in UK children's literature commissioned by **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education** and funded by **Arts Council England**.

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