How are texts selected to ensure a representation of BAME characters? How does this impact children's engagement in reading and writing?

Orchard Primary School, KS1 Phase

Abstract

The aim and purpose of this research was to explore how teachers choose texts to reflect the cultural representation in their class and the impact that this has on engagement.

The study utilised whole school training, phase and year group discussions to ascertain the gaps in representation within the core texts studied. The focus was children in Year 2 and their teachers, including two newly qualified. Evidence from the study suggests that when children see familiar cultural representation in a text they are more engaged and outcomes in writing are of a higher quality; using the end of KS1 assessment framework as an indicator. The project also demonstrated that when teachers are actively involved in this text selection then they develop their own knowledge and use this to show positive presentations of BAME people across the curriculum.

Introduction

Orchard is a larger than the average-sized primary school situated next to a large housing estate in the vibrant and diverse London Borough of Hackney. The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is higher than the national average and a significant number of children who enter EYFS are below the age expected level in many areas of learning.

The in house value added data from December 2019 (Fig. 1) shows all pupils from Years Two to Six made significantly above expected progress in reading, writing and maths. However, the data also showed that Black African and Black Caribbean pupils made less progress in reading, writing and maths compared to all pupils.

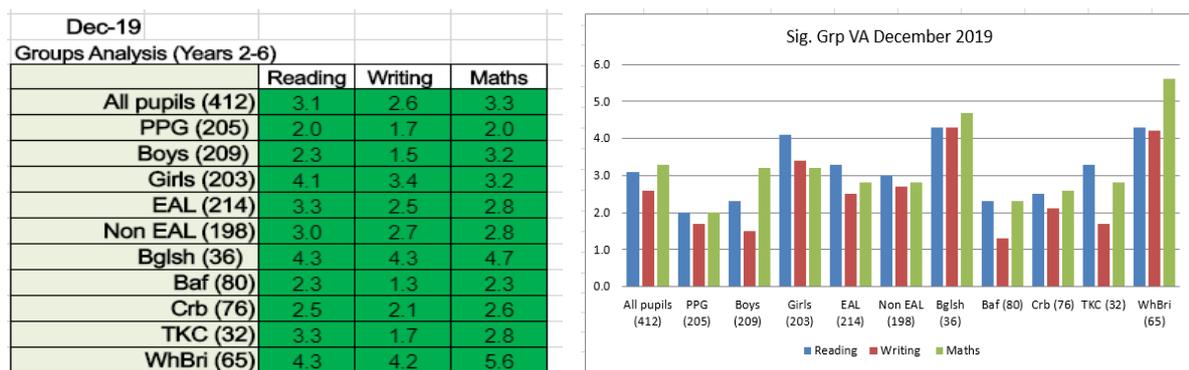| Dec-19 Groups Analysis (Years 2-6)	Reading	Writing	Maths
All pupils (412)	3.1	2.6	3.3
PPG (205)	2.0	1.7	2.0
Boys (209)	2.3	1.5	3.2
Girls (203)	4.1	3.4	3.2
EAL (214)	3.3	2.5	2.8
Non EAL (198)	3.0	2.7	2.8
Bglsh (36)	4.3	4.3	4.7
Baf (80)	2.3	1.3	2.3
Crb (76)	2.5	2.1	2.6
TKC (32)	3.3	1.7	2.8
WhBri (65)	4.3	4.2	5.6

Fig 1. Orchard Whole School Analysis Significant Groups Value Added, December 2019

Recurring evidence reveals that representation of BAME characters in children's books is low, (Serroukh, 2018). Through attending literacy courses and reading forums throughout this time, the literacy coordinator recognised the drive for better ethnic representation and considered the impact on children's engagement and progression of skills throughout a literacy unit. Louise Johns-Shepherd reflected that *'We are heartened that more children will be able to see themselves reflected in their reading material. Better representation means just that, better in all regards, because all young readers deserve the best that the literary world has to offer.'* (Johns-Shepherd, 2019) and this provided the aspired outcome from the project.

Through a study from 2018 by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE, 2018), researchers found that only 4% of children's texts featured Black, Asian and minority ethnic characters and just 1% had a BAME main character. This is a stark contrast to the 33.5% of primary school pupils of minority ethnic origins in England in 2019, (Department for Education, 2019). At Orchard, 38% of the school population

identify as Black African or Black Caribbean. It is not only important for these children to see themselves and their cultures represented in texts but also for children of all backgrounds to see these ethnicities as main characters within stories and positive role models to counterbalance any socially constructed biases.

In April and September 2019, all Viridis staff took part in Cultural Competence Training delivered by the Hackney Learning Trust (now Hackney Education). The programme focused on unconscious and cultural bias, racial identity development theory and cultural competency. Many of the statistics shared were alarming therefore providing staff with an opportunity to reflect upon their practice and think critically. The aim of the training was that "by the end of the day, participants will be able to challenge their own perceptions, know about what others are doing to improve outcomes for BAME young men and women and have the courage and starting points in which they can develop inclusive schools." (HLT, 2019)

With this in mind, the aim of this study was to explore the core texts and the representations of characters within these that teachers use during literacy teaching in Key Stage One. As teachers, we make choices on behalf of young readers and challenging choice and rationale for choice is important. The process would therefore involve searching for texts that represented BAME characters and measuring the impact that those texts have on a focus group of children and their writing. With regards to impact, this study considered the children's understanding of the text, their own writing in response to the stimulus and their engagement and enjoyment. It also considered the viewpoints of the teachers and professionals delivering this provision.

The project was coordinated by the Phase Leader and supported by three teachers and three members of support staff within Key Stage One. The project was designed to run for a term and a half beginning in Spring Term and include three core text units. However, due to the spread of Covid-19 which led to the partial closures of schools only one unit was taught.

Research Process

The Viridis Federation carried out extensive work to update their Literacy curriculum for the academic year 2019-2020. This included updated core text suggestions as well as key learning intentions. At the beginning of the research project all teachers met and discussed the suggested core texts from the curriculum document, the process of choosing reading material for class novels and reading sessions as well as the children's engagement and outcomes. Through these focused conversations, it was clear that rich, engaging and varied texts were being chosen yet BAME characters and authors were under represented (Fig. 2).

| Year Group	Animals	White main character	BAME main character
1	7	6	0
2	3	10	1

Fig. 2 The main characters in the suggested texts from medium term plans in KS1

It is important to make clear that these texts are suggestions only and alternatives can be used. However, for newly qualified teachers, teachers who are new to a year group and unfamiliar with a range of texts it is easier and less timely to adhere to these suggestions. Through further discussions, it became evident that books chosen to share at story time or in reading sessions were also lacking BAME characters; therefore, many of our children were not seeing their culture portrayed in the books read at school potentially at all. It was identified parts of the school day that could be used to include and promote BAME characters and how this could be easily managed.

Through discussions, it was decided that Year 2 would plan and teach a fiction unit, non-fiction unit and a reading unit based around books with BAME protagonists. Due to the shorter data collection period, only the narrative unit was taught fully and the reading text was completed partially through home learning. Alongside these key texts being taught, two other main strategies were introduced. Firstly, it was decided that teachers would demonstrate more awareness and therefore be more proactive when selecting images used in teaching resources such as flip charts. Dylan Calder states, "*[through children's literature] we learn about the diversity of things*" (Calder, 2019). So for example, when discussing or introducing new vocabulary in a phonics lesson,

images of people from different ethnic backgrounds should be used and these should challenge unconscious bias. In addition, a new area within KS1 classrooms was launched; the diversity book display (Fig 3). This celebrated books with central BAME characters along with key questions for children to consider. It was decided that these books would be shared in class novel time and children would have free access to these just as they would all books within the classroom particularly during weekly parent reading sessions.

Fig. 3 An example of a diverse book display
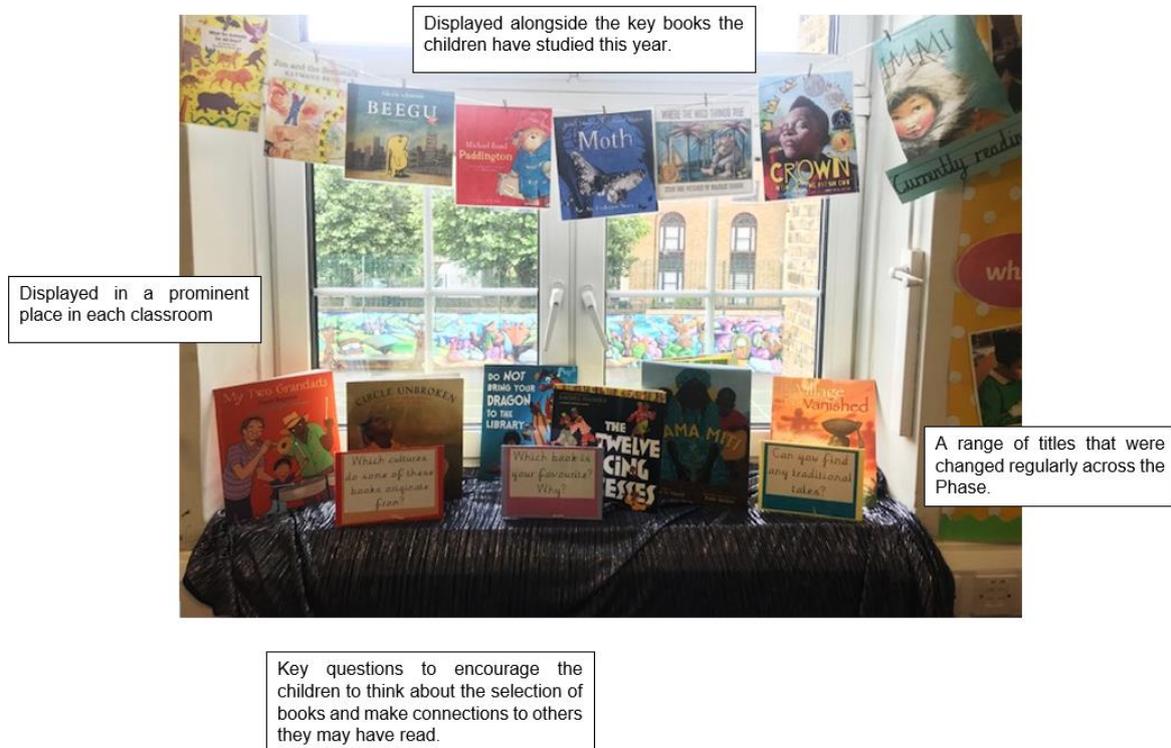
Finding the right narrative text was crucial. It became evident that as a team, the knowledge of quality texts with positive BAME representation were not robust. It also became clear that it was difficult to find such texts online easily. It seemed that many teachers had been searching for similar book recommendations yet many forums were based in the US. With this discovery, it was decided that throughout this project, a list of quality texts with representation of BAME characters would be compiled which can

then be added to, referred back to and used as a working document to ensure texts with positive representation of BAME characters are continually used with the phase.

After reading a small selection of fiction texts, *Crown: An Ode to Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes was chosen to be the narrative focus. The main reasons for this were:

- character of a young BAME boy is approximately the same age as the children in the study
- the story focusses on getting a new haircut which many children have previous experience of doing and can therefore connect with
- the language used within the book is expansive and will broaden children's vocabulary yet also includes colloquial phrases that they could be familiar with outside of school
- the illustrations take up the whole page and capture each part of the story whilst enable insightful inferences to be made throughout (an end of KS1 assessment focus)

Using the approach of teaching backwards (Griffith and Burns, 2014), the plans created (Appendix 3) began with children using inference to deduce what the story might be about, where it is set and the characters featured. Lessons then went on to sharing and reading the text, unpicking key vocabulary to build comprehension and progressed to using the structure of the story to create their own versions of a story inspired by the boy's transformation at the barbers. Each lesson recapped the learning journey so far and ensured children were aware of the intended outcome they were working towards. All three classes began a working wall to display children's outcomes, their responses, and illustrations from the text and key vocabulary.

Findings

At the outset of the project, all teachers involved cited that they would use the recommendations from the curriculum document to teach a literacy unit. Through this project, the teachers were challenged to research and read more widely. This initially

was encouraged by the research lead but as the study continued their subject knowledge with regards to representational texts widened and the way texts were selected to use as class novels, in story time or proposing to study in class changed; they were more confident to select texts that featured under-represented groups as main characters and that they would actively seek to do so.

All participants were able to reflect that the project had enabled better knowledge of text selection. One teacher stated: *Yes – choosing texts that are more relatable to support with interest and engagement. I now actively look for texts that don't just show white characters.*

The teachers were also agreed entirely that representation and diversity in texts was important. One stated that it built rapport with the children while another identified that "*it is important for children to learn about the different cultures within their class*". One class teacher who took part in the study spoke passionately about the importance of diversity within texts, writing: *When children understand and are invested I think their outcomes are better. Reading different texts is crucial for young children to construct their own ideas and realities too so representation of all underrepresented groups or that challenge society's perception is important. These are the books that I will be actively seeking out in the future.* (Appendix 4). This question had not been posed prior to the project however exposes the reflectiveness on their pedagogy and shows they understand how children learn whilst promoting good progress and outcomes for children.

Two of these teachers involved were newly qualified. This project instilled a confidence in both young professionals to have autonomy over the content that they are delivering as well as shape how they select core texts. If teachers demonstrate passion and enthusiasm for the texts at the centre of a unit, children will feel inspired and engage at a deeper level; thus impacting progress positively. The fact that teachers at the start of their career have seen the positive impact in this project is crucial to its success and legacy. Another teacher commented, *"when I became more aware of authors of colour it was easier to find new books to use and also recognise how narrow the representation had been previous to this project."* Through the project, these teachers

have been involved in collating the 'recommended reads' document. The fact that they have played an active role in this will ensure it is continued as a live document as we move forward to the next academic year and beyond.

It was noted almost immediately by all teaching staff involved in the project that children showed a higher level of engagement in the narrative text chosen. (Appendix 4). Teachers commented that *"Some of* [the boys] *copied the boy's pose whereas another pointed out the similarity of the boy's looks to another child in the school*." By opting for this book, the teachers were holding a mirror to children in their class and it was incredibly positive to see that the children were inspired by this. *"It's validating for kids to meet a character in a story who has hair that resembles theirs or wears glasses just like they do"* (Rodriguez, 2018). This initial engagement was seen in a variety of ways within the classroom as seen below:
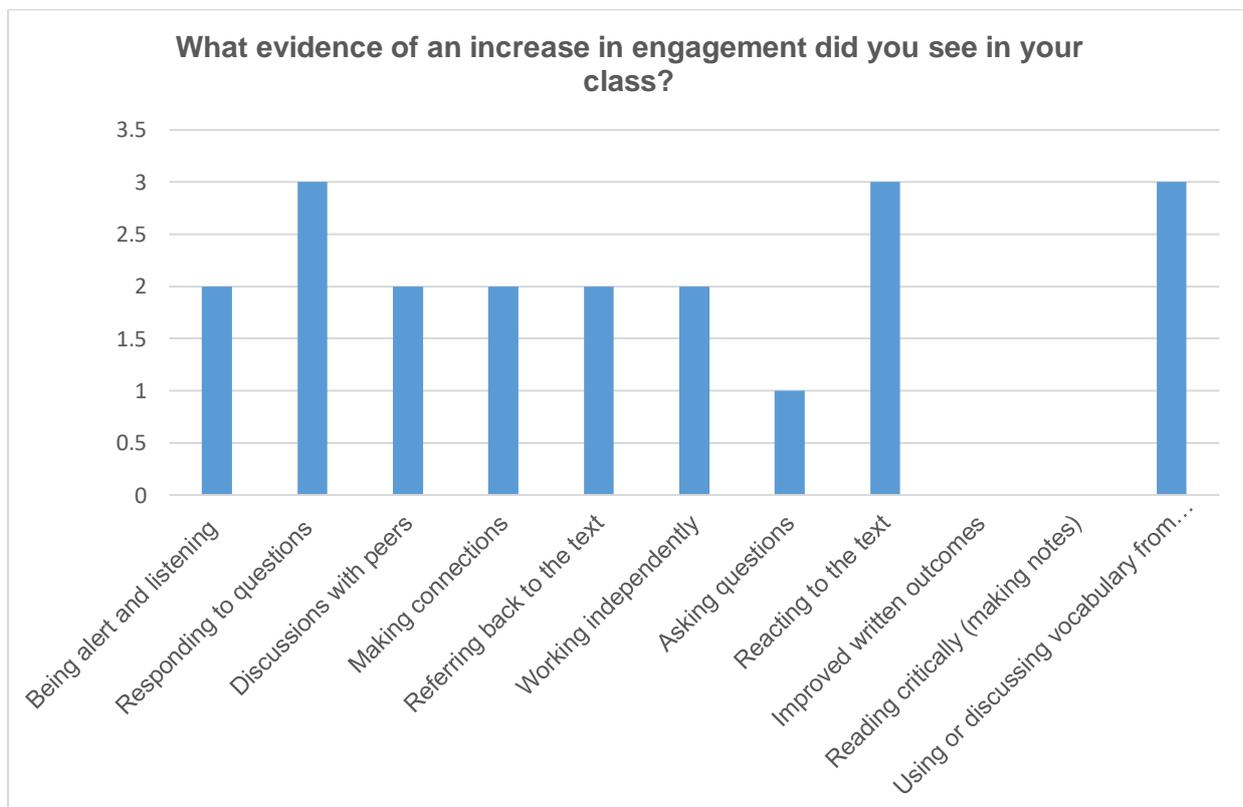

Fig 4: Class teacher's recognition of pupil engagement throughout the unit

Interestingly none of the teachers cited that improved written outcomes were an indicator of higher engagement yet all teachers acknowledged that written outcomes were different and of a higher quality than previously taught narrative units. This could be due to the progression of skills taught throughout the unit building towards a final outcome; something which had been a focus during CPD and NQT mentor sessions. Moreover, one teacher reflected: *"I found that the children were able to replicate the story and create their own version much easier. I'm not sure whether because I was more engaged in the story as I was passionate about representing children or because children were more engaged."*

It is pleasing to see that all teachers recognised children were able to use and discuss vocabulary from the text. Oracy and the use of vocabulary across the curriculum is a continual focus at Orchard. To reflect this, when planning this unit a specific lesson focusing on vocabulary, contextual understanding and possible synonyms was planned and taught. However, even before this lesson one teacher noted: "*at the beginning of this unit the boys especially really enjoyed picking apart the vocabulary of this text and could tell me times that they heard language such as 'fly' or 'smooth lines' in places such as a barber shop."* Again, this is providing a mirror to children's lives and making texts in the classroom more relatable which in turn led to a greater understanding.

To measure pupil voice, small group interview with ten children was conducted. Although most children had agreed that they had enjoyed these texts they were not all able to identify why. This could be because the interview was a short time after each unit had been completed but also because they were unable to articulate or recognise clearly enough why they liked a story. One child's comment particularly stood out *"I liked it because my family are from Barbados"* and reinforces his teacher's comments that "*one child in particular (a lower ability BAME Caribbean boy) was thrilled that his classmates were learning words spoken in Barbados.*" This was the aim of this project, to expose teachers to the benefits of studying texts that children can feel represented and relate to.

Findings from across the curriculum show that not only were the texts chosen to study at the forefront to the teachers' minds but also the teaching resources too. Teachers developed the habit of searching for a wide range of visual resources to represent the children in their class too. For example, when one teacher was planning the Year 2 resources for Science Day, she purposely sought out an image of a BAME female scientist to provide a visual alongside key vocabulary. Not only does this demonstrate an awareness of representation in terms of race but also gender; proving that through this project teachers are actively reacting to under-representation of many groups in education.

All teachers in the project valued the introduction of the diversity book corner yet this was not as impactful as hoped. When interviewing pupils many were unable to tell me why these books were displayed and in some cases these became static displays instead of areas in which the children could explore.

Impact and Conclusion

This project sought to interrogate the way in which teachers select their core teaching texts to include positive representations of BAME characters. It is evident that the teachers involved are more knowledgeable of these texts, more active in book choices and challenge their own unconscious bias when resourcing for children. This in turn has engaged the children, particularly BAME boys and has had a positive impact on their writing in response to the stimulus.

At the time of writing this, the Black Lives Matter movement in Britain and across the world has been ignited making this project even more relevant. This research should now be used as a driving force to make changes to our curriculum to ensure it is broad, rich, diverse and representative of all the children we teach.

It is clear that the impact has been a shift in mindset of the teachers involved and this is fundamental to the ongoing impact this research will have. In addition, we have seen a cohort of children show higher levels of engagement in texts due to their teacher's

investment and the fact they can see themselves within the text. They have seen themselves in images across the curriculum that will inspire them in the future.

The following recommendations are to be made as a result of this research. The recommended reads booklist detailing books written by people of colour and with BAME characters as central protagonists is to be shared with all teaching staff. It would also be beneficial to raise the profile of this further by ensuring this is a working document displayed prominently on the curriculum board in the shared staff area. This would support further discussion and for teachers to develop and broaden their knowledge of children's literature and build confidence when selecting these texts t study as part of the literacy curriculum. Frequent reminders and the sharing of best practice of resources used that challenge unconscious bias and promote the representation of BAME children across the curriculum would also provide effective CPD for all staff. Classrooms will be encouraged to have a dedicated reading corner that incorporates and celebrates books written by and featuring BAME characters with investment into reading booklist texts to support active promotion.

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