How does the use of carefully selected book resources influence children's awareness of diverse cultural backgrounds?

Isabel (Izzy) Haigh

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Abstract

This research aims to address how the use of carefully selected books can influence children's diverse cultural awareness. It will investigate why children's cultural awareness needs to be developed and the role that books could have in supporting this. The research addresses the lack of representation within books used in the classroom and the increased demand for improving representation within the classroom. The goal is that children will all have access to books that reflect their realities while also allowing for opportunities to learn about the diverse world around us. The research method chosen for this project was action research due to the fact it seeks to improve the way that children and teachers understand and participate in the world. It was found that children do seek to read books that have characters and stories that reflect their experiences and that this can have significant implications for their self-esteem and interest in reading. It was also found that books create an ideal foundation for facilitating conversations around what may be viewed as 'taboo' topics such as race, culture and social justice.

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Introduction

This research project intended to explore the influence that books can have on children's awareness of diverse cultural backgrounds. The focus for this research was decided upon as a result of CPD events that highlighted the need for more emphasis on promoting diverse educational practices. Lack of inclusion and representation of diverse cultures is a current issue in education and was the catalyst for this research. The goal of this research is to increase children's and teachers' awareness of the importance and value of reading culturally diverse literature, in order to reduce negative stereotypes and unhelpful assumptions of different backgrounds.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to outline the motivations for this research project and the current issues around diversity facing the education system. It aims to give context for why there needs to be an improvement in children's cultural awareness and the role children's books has in this. Throughout this research, the terms *ethnic minority* and *diverse cultures* are used to represent those who do not identify as White British. These terms are recommended and preferred to terms such as BAME or BIPOC due to the fact that definitions such as BAME are only relevant to some minority groups in Britain and excludes others (GOV.UK, 2022; NEU, 2022). It is to be acknowledged that referring to

groups as *ethnic minorities* is in relation to the population in Britain and it is accepted that many of these ethnicities reflect global majorities.

Absence of Minority Groups in Children's Literature and Stereotyping

This section will discuss the absence of minority groups in children's literature and the involvement of stereotypes and negative characterisations that exist within current literature. Stereotyping and marginalisation of minority groups is a persistent problem in children's literature (Thomas, 2016) and there is a long way to go before the books on our shelves accurately emulate the diversity of British society and the wider world (Gamble, 2021). The CLPE (2020) announced that only 8% of children's books contain an ethnic minority main character, yet 34.5% of pupils in England are from a minority ethnic background (GOV.UK, 2022). It is therefore clear that more needs to be done in the way of increasing representation of minority groups in the literature we provide children. Not only do books not accurately represent British society, but when efforts are made to have a diverse representation of cultures and ethnic backgrounds, they do not accurately reflect diverse cultures and life experiences. This results in the formation of negative stereotypes and development of racial bias among children (Brown-Wood and Solari, 2021). Therefore, literature needs to offer counter narratives about the experiences of ethnic minorities that are not focused on pain, catastrophe, stereotypes and negative portrayals (Gultekin and May, 2019; Brown-Wood and Solari, 2021).

It is also noted that many books that do have culturally diverse themes contribute to stereotypes through focusing on different cultures' food, celebrations and festivals. While

this may be well intended and may indeed give readers a good base-knowledge, it can provide a superficial and stereotypical understanding of different cultures (Bennet *et al,* 2022; Ong 2022). Developing this, Gultekin and May (2019) highlight that popular books such as 'Mirror' (by Jeannie Baker), if selected by teachers, need to be used carefully and with context to avoid developing children's misconceptions or harmful stereotypes based on other countries cultures. While the book provides an accurate portrayal of rural Morocco, it is not accurate to Morocco as a whole. This in itself is not problematic, however, with the book being heavily focused on comparing the lives of two boys of different cultures (one in rural Morocco and the other in a large Australian city) it becomes an unfair comparison that distorts readers' views. Therefore, what readers need is access to reading material that tells stories of 'different ordinary worlds' that show realistic and positive representations of diverse backgrounds, rather than focusing on difference, crisis or struggle (Gamble, 2021 p158; CLPE, 2021). This way, positive attitudes can be enhanced and children will gain greater awareness and appreciation of other cultures (Klefstad and Martinez, 2013). By providing children with carefully selected literature that accurately represents other cultures, children are able to make meaningful connections to children in their community and around the world (Harper and Brand, 2010).

Windows and Mirrors

Throughout this literature search it has been noted that access to culturally diverse books provides children with 'mirrors' that affirm their identities and reflect children's lived experiences and 'windows' that give children insight into the cultures beyond their own community (Dávila, 2015; Sailors and Kaambankadzanja, 2017; Gunn, Bennet and

Peterson, 2022). Providing books that reflect readers' wider range of backgrounds enables children to connect with characters that have similar lived experiences or that share their culture or religion (Bennet *et al*, 2022).

As previously noted, the world of children's literature is highly white-focused and lacking key characters of ethnic minority backgrounds. As found by Yenika-Agbaw (2014), when children think of fairy tales, they often imagine stories of beautiful, white, princesses that marry handsome princes. While it is accepted that these stories are not intended to be realistic, they contribute toward an atmosphere of white superiority, eroding the self-esteem of children who do not fit the 'beautiful and white skinned' narrative. Although earlier studies by Holmes (*et al*, 2007) found that sharing of race is not necessarily important when children are choosing a book, more recent studies have found otherwise. Brown-Wood and Solari (2021) found that the race of characters on book covers can influence children's likelihood of engaging with a book. This can leave children of diverse backgrounds feeling disengaged with reading, not connecting to characters or the storylines that support them.

Most White British children do not face this same struggle to see themselves in the literature they read and in fact often are oblivious to the consequences this can have for children of diverse backgrounds. Most children are only spoken to about race when it becomes relevant in their lives, usually in negative contexts, which leaves children with an unbalanced view on race as well as a lack of awareness of racial bias and prejudices (Michael and Bartoli, 2014). This accentuates the need to increase diversity within

education and to push schools to address racial inequality, norms and assumptions in order to teach children not just tolerance of others but also active acceptance and respect (Green and Oldendorf, 2005; NEU and NCL, 2022). The CLPE (2021) encourage that *all* readers should have access to multicultural literature and should read stories with positive representations of characters of ethnic minority backgrounds as a meaningful element of mainstream literature.

Children are more motivated and engaged with reading when they are able to see themselves in the books that they read, fairy tale or not, and should have plentiful access to books that are age and ability appropriate and culturally relevant to their lives (Gunn, Bennet and Peterson, 2022). By enabling children to access a wide range of books that are rich in diversity, all children are able to connect with characters and stories that shape their views of themselves, others and the world (Salem, 2021; Liou, 2021) which can have immediate and long-lasting effects on young readers (Harrington,2016).

Attitudes to Reading and Self-esteem

Reading can have significant implications for children's self-image and feelings of belonging. According to the CLPE (2022), if children never get access to books with characters or stories that reflect their life, culture or background, their reading motivation and enjoyment of reading can be severely limited. This is the case for many children with representation of diverse cultures still being limited. For instance, 6.8% of the English population is reported to be Asian, yet only 2.2% of books feature an Asian main character (CLPE, 2020). This emphasises the need to provide well-selected, culturally diverse

books to enable all children to feel connected to characters and stories in the books they read (Osorio, 2018). Henry (2021) also highlights that increasing the positive presence and representation of diverse cultures in the classroom will improve children's self-esteem. It is clear that providing children with books that are full of diverse representation has clear benefits that go beyond increasing children's cultural awareness, fostering underrepresented children's sense of belonging and legitimacy (Cusworth, 2022). This would result in higher interest and engagement with reading.

It is also important to note the impact that home life can have on children's attitudes to reading. Children from low-income families, particularly of diverse cultural backgrounds, have limited access to books, especially books that reflect their realities (Gunn, 2022). It is also the case that the more that children read, the more chance they have to become good readers with increased fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (Massey, Vaughn, and Hiebert, 2022). This heavily weighs on children's willingness and interest in reading as not only are they not feeling represented in the books they are offered, but they do not have access to books at home to increase reading for pleasure and reading ability in the first place. This is further established by White *et al* (2014) who state that it is essential to provide children with access to books that interest them in order to boost their literacy ability. Access to high-quality, culturally relevant books evidently plays a key role in children's reading interest and consequently their reading skills.

Moreover, it was highlighted by Henry (2021) that many Black children feel an absence of presence within the classroom and feel disengaged with the National Curriculum.

Supporting this, the Black Curriculum emphasise that cultural diversity is extremely lacking in the National Curriculum, particularly amongst the core subjects (Arday, 2021). Similar findings were made in a survey by the House of Commons (2021), discovering that 74% of teachers do not think the curriculum reflects the diversity of modern Britain and that 45% of teachers believe children are not exposed to ethnically and culturally diverse role models. Arday (2021) recommends that teachers provide children with texts written by Black people, that speak to Black perspectives, experiences and accomplishments, a recommendation that could be applied to the representation of all cultures and development of all children's diverse cultural awareness.

Encouraging Social Justice and Equality Alongside Development of Wider Skills

Children's books are a key tool for teaching and are one way that teachers can provide opportunity for discussions that support the development of children's cultural awareness (Stevenson, 2019; Brown-Wood and Solari, 2021). Multicultural literature enables children to produce a new awareness of other cultures, leading to greater understanding and acceptance of others (Holmes *et al,* 2007; Klefstad and Martinez, 2013), while building on moral skills such as empathy (Muravevskaia, Tavassoli and Gardner-McCune, 2016). For teachers to prepare children to be culturally educated, culturally responsive teaching is crucial. According to Goh (2012), culturally responsive teaching involves encouraging respect, not just tolerance of others, while celebrating uniqueness and difference. This is further supported by Monoyiou and Symeonidou (2016) who state that children's books can support children in appreciating and respecting people with different characteristics or beliefs than their own.

In our ever-growing multicultural society, it is necessary for schools to address racism and explore ideas about race and diverse cultures in order to encourage children to become pluralistic members of society (Davila, 2015). Arguably, without this input, misconceptions and negative stereotypes will continue to develop for future generations leading to an increase in racism (NEU, 2022). However, it is important to recognise that not all children have pre-conceived misconceptions and, in some cases, have no prior knowledge of certain cultures (Harrington, 2016). Through the careful selection of diverse books, we can introduce children to concepts and facts about other ways of life (Klefstad and Martinez, 2013). Selecting literature that challenges stereotypes and social injustices encourages children to question unfair acts and discriminatory language and stand up for equality and social justice (DeNicolo and Franquiz, 2006; Harper and Brand, 2010; Ong, 2022). Therefore, multicultural literature, can be used as a tool for promoting diverse cultural awareness and up to date understanding, and can contribute toward a more accepting society with fewer hate crimes (Bennet *et al*, 2022).

As highlighted by Newstreet, Sarker and Shearer (2019), books create opportunities for children to identify, question and explore social concepts and experiences, while also developing their literacy skills. Encountering such concepts encourages children to inquire further about concepts and vocabulary, developing children's enquiry and research skills alongside social and cultural competence (DeNicolo and Franquiz, 2006). Exposure to multicultural literature can provide children with a wealth of new vocabulary and language that they may not otherwise acquire (Harper and Brand, 2010), advancing

both their cultural understanding and literacy skills. Culturally diverse books that are accurate in their representations can be immersed across the curriculum, not just in literacy lessons or PSHE. For instance, expanding accuracy of children's world knowledge when teaching about weather or human geography (Klefstad and Martinez, 2013; Harrington, 2016) and providing purposeful opportunities to explore different cultures throughout history (Botelho, 2015). As highlighted by Arday (2021), widening children's understanding of topics such as Black History can help reduce the build-up of stereotype within society, while showing Black people that there is more to their history than slavery (Cusworth, 2022).

Research Methods

This project was conducted using action research, due to the fact it lends well to practical, small-scale projects and aims to address and improve real-world problems and issues (Denscomb, 2007). This project aimed to determine the influence books can have on children's diverse cultural awareness, ultimately providing a goal to bring about social change and promote improvement of understanding, all qualities of which Mertler (2021) highlight to best fit action research. It is also noted by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) that action research can be used to encourage positive attitudes and develop children's value systems with regard to an aspect of life. Consequently, action research accommodates this project, exploring the development of children's diverse cultural awareness. The research followed a mixed-methods approach, with mostly qualitative data (interview, questionnaire and focus group) and some quantitative data (questionnaire).

Data Collection

Focus Group

Due to the school's timetable and curriculum demands, it was decided that the best way to collect data from the children would be through a focus group. Focus groups allow the researcher to create an environment in which you can explore attitudes and perceptions around a certain area of interest, focusing on the interactions between group members and the conversations and comments that arise (Denscombe, 2007). A more observable approach such as this reduces the feeling of formality and prevents the need for the participants to have to communicate through writing, which can be challenging for children (McAteer, 2013). In order to retain consistency and allow all children to have a voice, Clough and Nutbrown (2012) recommend a group size of 4-7 children. For this project, the Year 3 class was invited to volunteer to be part of the research and then, from those volunteers, six children were purposely selected to participate. Purposeful selection was preferred due to being able to choose specific children for the reason of ensuring the group was mixed ability, mixed gender and able to represent diverse cultures (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). The children were aware that they would be participating in the project for up to 8 weeks and were encouraged to participate for the duration but it was made clear that they were able to withdraw participation at any point.

For the first week, children were provided with pictures of other children (Appendix 1) and were asked to assign four adjectives to each child pictured. They were given two at a time to choose from; nice or mean, smart or not smart, friendly or rude, happy or sad. There

responses were recorded by tally as they were given. Then the children were provided with a two group images (Appendix 2 and 3) and asked to decide which child they would want to be friends with and why. This was to determine if there were any standing stereotypes or cultural biases. The pictures chosen aimed to show children in the same settings (classrooms), doing them same thing (learning) and with similar facial expressions where possible.

To determine the impact that books have on children's awareness of diverse cultures, it was important to observe them engage and interact with books. Informal note taking took place during and after each weekly meeting, recording children's comments and interactions with one other. Children were invited to choose a new book each week from the provided box of culturally diverse books (over 100 books). The children then had a week to pass the book around amongst one another ready for discussion the following week. The books explored and chosen by the children were: '*Our Tower'* by Joseph Coelho, *'Proudest Blue'* by Ibtihaj Muhammad, *'Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World'* by Kate Pankhurst, and *'Welcome to Our World'* by Moira Butterfield. *'Look Up!'* by Nathan Bryon was also selected but was not able to be explored due to a series of snow days.

Questionnaires (Appendix 4)

The final method of data collection was a questionnaire sent out to staff within the school to ascertain teachers' perspectives on the need to improve children's cultural awareness and the role of books within this. The questionnaire involved a mixture of open and closed

questions. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) highlight that there are advantages and disadvantages to both questioning styles and so it was deemed most appropriate to use a combination in order to invite honest and personalised responses using open questioning, while using closed questions to provide focus and reduce respondent fatigue.

Semi-structured Interview (Appendix 5)

Another method of data collection used for the project was a semi-structured interview where open-ended questions were prepared in advance to address specific areas. This was selected due to the flexible nature, of which the interviewee would be able to speak more widely and expand upon ideas and points of interest (Denscombe, 2007; Lambert, 2012). The interview aimed to determine what is considered when purchasing and selecting books for school and how culturally representative the books are of children in school.

Participants and Ethical Considerations

This research obtained ethical approval from York St John University prior to taking place and remained in line with ethical guidelines throughout. Informed consent was granted by the Headteacher of the primary school before conducting the research and each participant was also required to actively consent prior to taking part. This was to ensure that all participants were aware of the nature of the study and how the data would be used before they committed to participating in order to remain in line with ethical recommendations (Bell, 2010). This project was carried out in a large, highly multicultural,

inner-city school of which both teachers and children took part in the research. It was important to clarify to participants that all data collected would be anonymous to encourage free speaking and that all names and identities would remain private (Koshy, 2010). For the purpose of this study each child was assigned a letter (A-F). Openness and honesty were crucial factors to the success of this research thus it was clarified to participants that the climate would be judgement free and honest thoughts and opinions should be shared, confidentially, between the group members.

Limitations of the Data Collection

It is important to acknowledge that this project was carried out over a short period of time (eight weeks) and considered a small sample size for collection of data. Response rate for questionnaires can be low (Lambert, 2012) and unfortunately was in this case with just 5 respondents. This presents possible concerns around reliability and validity due to its small-scale nature and therefore inability to generalise (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012; Atkins and Wallace, 2016). In the future it could be beneficial to conduct this research using a greater sample size to represent a larger population. Knowing this, it was crucial to have a diverse focus group to gain as broad representation as possible. Another limitation of the data collection was inviting the children to select which books would be explored. Although this enabled them to have more autonomy and greater engagement with the books, there were books that could have been more beneficial to explore in order to increase children's awareness of diverse cultures.

Findings

The findings from this research project are split into three sections in order to provide clarity.

Focus Group

Children were presented with photographs of different children, representing various cultural backgrounds (Appendix 1, children pictured 1 -10). Immediate comparisons based on appearance were made between children in the photographs and participants in the group. Children commented that photographed Child 4 looked like Child B, even though their only similarity was that both children were wearing Hijab. Similar comparisons were made between photographed Child 6 and participant Child A, "She looks like Child A!", even though, again, the only similarity was that both children were Black and wore braids. Likewise, comparison was made between photographed Child 1 and participant Child E, despite the fact that they also did not look alike, aside from both boys having white skin, presenting completely different eye colour, hair colour and facial features. Participants also responded that photographed Child 9 looked "funny" and "weird", "because of what he wears on his head".

Children were each asked to select one child from the pictures (Appendix 1). Then the group were given four sets of two adjectives to assign to each child pictured, voting on whether they thought that child pictured was nice or mean, smart or not smart, friendly or rude, happy or sad. The pictures elected were children 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8. All the children chose positive comments (nice, smart and friendly) about pictured Child 1 and 2, other

than selecting 'sad' rather than 'happy'. Similarly, for pictured Child 6, all participants attributed them with positive characteristics, choosing nice, smart, friendly and happy. It could be possible that this was because they were making connections again between the child pictured and Child A, who also represented those qualities. Pictured Child 7 was unanimously described as nice, however most (5) children described them as not smart, rude and sad. Connections were made between pictured Child 8 and participant Child B. Chosen attributes for Child 8 were mixed, with 4 children choosing nice and 2 choosing not nice, 2 children chose 'friendly' rather than 'rude' and all children except Child B assigned the pictured child as not smart and sad rather than happy. This suggests that children make assumptions of others based on their cultural background.

Children's interactions in the weekly sessions suggested that children have awareness of the concept of racism and bullying behaviours. This was particularly evident when reading "The Proudest Blue". For instance, Child D highlighted that bullying someone because they wear Hijab is racist. This sparked conversation amongst the group about why someone may choose to wear Hijab, enabling children to express their own experiences. Child C commented that their mother chose to wear Hijab, but was not sure why, even though she too was Muslim. This then led to other members of the group educating their peers about their experiences with Hijab and why their family members chose to wear it. Similarly, when reading 'Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World', some children recognised racist behaviours, one child commented "They [people in the past] were so racist! They didn't want her [Mary Seacole] to be a doctor because she was Black". This suggests that exploring books that feature characters of diverse cultural

backgrounds can provide opportunities for meaningful discussions in which children can learn more about others' experiences. Books explored allowed children to identify and learn about cultures and ethnicities that they had no prior knowledge on such as people of Native American background. Access to books with diverse representation spiked their curiosity of other cultures, leaving the children wanting to know more.

In the last session, the children were asked a series of questions. In response to the question "[Before the book box] Did you find it easy or hard to find books that you like?", 5 children voted 'hard', one child voted 'easy'. When asked "Do you think there are enough books with characters that look like you?", 1 child voted 'No', 5 children selected 'not sure'. In response to this question, Child D commented that they "wish there were more characters that look like me", Child A also commented saying "not many characters have Black skin", followed by Child C commenting "I haven't read enough to know if there are enough books with characters like me". This data suggests that children feel underrepresented in the books that are available to them.

Questionnaires

In response to the question "Do books children have access to books that promote reading for pleasure?" teachers responded that within school books were promoting reading for pleasure due to the recent push the school had on incorporating more diversity of characters in the books they study. However, all the teachers responding in the survey also identified that the main barriers to children's reading for pleasure were lack of access to books at home and families not viewing reading as important.

Teachers were asked to rank the following four ways of developing children's cultural awareness from least effective to most effective; books and reading material, immersion, set days, or inviting members of the community to school. 60% of the respondents to the survey ranked books and literacy resources as the most effective way to increase children's cultural awareness in school, with the other 40% ranking books as their second choice. This evidence suggests that books and reading materials are indeed a useful approach to improving children's cultural awareness. On the same question, participants reported set days dedicated toward developing children's awareness of diverse cultures as the least effective way to improve children's diverse cultural awareness.

Figure 1: Consider the school and local area, how would you rate the cultural awareness of these groups?
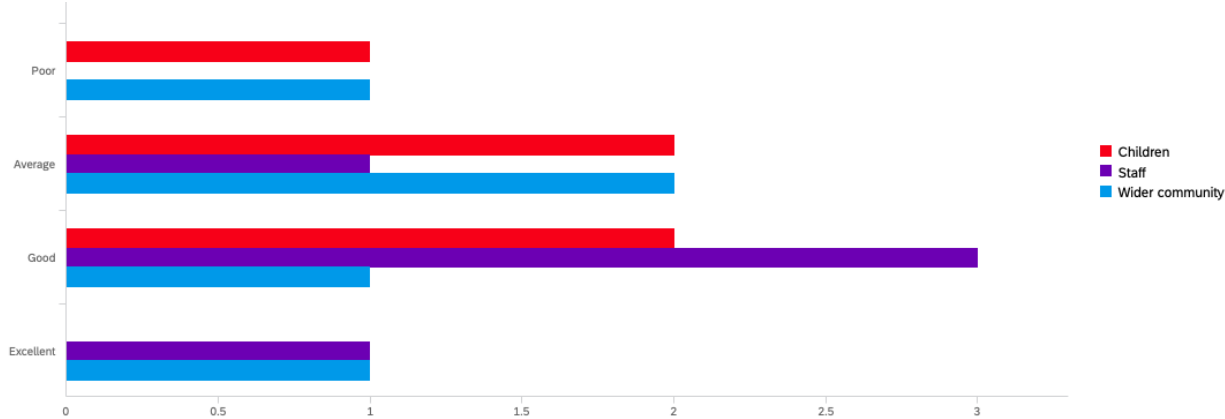
It was reported that staff rate themselves as having average to excellent cultural awareness, with no participants reporting staff as having poor cultural awareness. The participants rated children's cultural awareness as poor to good, with no reports of

children having excellent cultural awareness. This suggests that children's cultural awareness is lacking and supports the claim that children's diverse cultural awareness needs to be improved. The findings show a mixed response for the rating of the cultural awareness of the wider community. This question produced quite mixed findings, likely due to the small quantity of participants for the survey and so cannot be generalised. Therefore, questions that elicited an open response such as those described earlier, were more useful for this element of research.

Semi Structured interview

A key finding from the interview was the need to incorporate literature that shows an equal representation of children in today's society. There were two themes identified in terms of representation when choosing books for school, those being cultural representation and representation of women. The teacher discussed that a significant consideration made was to choose books that would help to break down stereotypes and increase children's sense of belonging and ability to make connections with characters and stories. The teacher was presented with the statistic that only 7% of children's books feature characters of colour, yet 33.5% of children in UK primary schools are from a minority ethnic background (CLPE, 2021). When asked how this made them feel, the teacher agreed, commenting that "children's books do not reflect the reality of British society" and that they were keen to find books with more representation in terms of authors and characters. They also stated that "More books need to have minority ethnic characters that *happen* to be key characters rather than that being the whole story".

In terms of representation of females, it was identified that many children at the school held misogynistic views towards women, some due to cultural expectations, and so selecting books with strong female protagonists was a key goal. The teacher highlighted that they aimed to have positive representations of women and girls across diverse cultures in order encourage children to think beyond traditional expectations and to boost expectations and aspirations of young girls. They noted that one way they were trying to implement this was through using different versions of traditional tales such as 'Cinderella'.

Another finding resulting from the interview was the difficulty of finding books that include stories and characters from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) community. The interviewee highlighted that when they have been looking for books that reflect the realities of their children's cultural background, they have not found any books reflecting the GRT community. This supported findings made when preparing for this research project and building the book collection for the focus group that, again, no books with GRT people were found. The teacher noted that this may be because many members of the GRT community in England are first generation and so there is not much out there yet.

Discussion

Throughout the time that this research was conducted, the children in the class all gravitated toward choosing books from the book box, rather than their usual collection of books. It is important to highlight that the book box provided for this research contained

a much larger selection of books in comparison to the usual collection provided to the class, as well as providing books that were much richer in diversity. It is recognised that the fact that children gravitated more toward the new book box provided could have been because they were new books, which is exciting in itself. It could also be possible that the children chose these books more often because they had greater choice as well as access to books that were more relevant to their experiences and interests, providing greater engagement (Massey, Vaughn and Hiebert, 2022). Children frequently commented that they preferred the books available in the new book box and that they found it easier to find books that they liked. This supports the literature review which found that children's reading motivation increases when they have access to books that reflect their realties.

The six children in the focus group also all reported that after the book box it was easier to find books with characters that looked like them, dressed like them and had a similar culture or religion. Child B frequently asked, "Have you got any more books with Muslims in?" or "Can you help me find another books with Muslims in?". This excitement and interest displayed by Child B suggests that children's interest in books can be influenced by whether their backgrounds are reflected in the stories, emulating the findings of Brown-Wood and Solari (2021). Access to such literature was clearly something that Child B had limited access to prior to the new book collection, supporting the clear demand for an increase in diverse culturally representative children's literature. This is something that schools certainly need to address, as many children do not get access to books at home and so desperately need access to high-quality, diverse books at school to increase

engagement with reading. As presented by the Free Books Campaign (2023), establishments such as local libraries are becoming increasingly limited, further reducing children's access to free books. This potentially has significant impact on the reading ability gap between children of different socio-economic backgrounds. People of ethnic minorities are more likely to be living in poverty in the UK (GOV.UK, 2020), putting them at a further academic disadvantage. This is further supported by the NEU and NCL (2022), stating that children of minority ethnic backgrounds in England have differential educational outcomes than their White British peers. Providing children with books that will meet their interests by reflecting their realities and teaching them about others could not only improve children's cultural awareness but also improve reading engagement and ability.

In the questionnaire a member of staff commented that they do not believe that they have adequate resources to support the development of children's cultural awareness beyond that of which is explored in PSHE and RE lessons. This was also noticed by Arday (2021) who published a report for the Black Curriculum highlighting the lack of diversity and specifically acknowledgement of Black History in curriculum subjects beyond PSHE or themed learning days. This suggests that more attention needs to be given toward diversifying the curriculum and providing learning opportunities that increase children's knowledge of diverse cultures across subject areas, including core subjects (English, mathematics and science). A recent study by The House of Commons (2021) found a strong consensus among teachers that cultural diversity needs to be embedded throughout the curriculum. Moreover, 'theme days' exploring cultures can be seen to

accentuate otherness and development of stereotypical views towards other cultures (Bennet *et al*, 2022). This supports the project findings which presented that teachers do not perceive theme days as an effective means to improve children's cultural awareness and instead recommend that cultural awareness is embedded into everyday learning through books and resources.

The data collected from the picture-based activity suggests that children do have racial biases and do make connections and comparisons based on the colour of people's skin or choice of religious garments. It was also common that children would make assumptions of others based on experiences with people they know who share similar appearance or characteristics. This suggests that it is required to improve children's cultural awareness to guide them toward having an accurate and authentic awareness of others and the world around them (Klefstad and Martinez, 2013; Ong, 2022). Providing children with high-quality multicultural literature opens opportunities for schools to address racial biases, assumptions and stereotypes while providing a window into the lives of others (Harper and Brand, 2010; NEU, 2022). This benefits all children and facilitates a classroom environment that is equipped with children who are respectful and accepting of others (Goh, 2012; Norris, 2020).

This study and the supporting literature (Yenika-Agbaw, 2014) indicates that books can reveal cultural nuances and opportunities to have meaningful conversations regarding race, culture and religion within the classroom. During the focus group, it was clear that children were able to passionately lead their own discussions when they encountered

topics such as women's rights, racism and cultural 'norms', supporting the findings of DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) that children engage more actively in discussions when they relate to such topics. Frequent expose to these opportunities can have great impact on children's values and awareness of diverse cultures and advance the development of positive attitudes (Zain and Nazir, 2008).

It is evident from the literature and findings that books need to have characters that *happen* to be of ethnic minority backgrounds, rather than that being the focus of the story. We need to help children to make connections between themselves and children of other cultures, accepting that while we may have cultural differences, we all share many experiences, feelings and thoughts (Klefstad and Martinez, 2013). Books can be an excellent tool for developing children's cultural awareness and frequent exposure to stories that encourage active thinking around social justice issues can significantly help children to formulate positive attitudes (Zin and Nasir, 2008). It is crucial that books are selected carefully, ideally following recommendations, as unfortunately it is often that while well intended, books can provide barriers to understanding and distort readers' views (Gultekin and May, 2019). This is why education and cultural awareness is pivotal in order for high-quality multicultural literature to be provided to children. Consequently, high-quality children's literature would include books that foster children's understanding of their own culture as well as development of awareness of other cultures (Harper and Brand, 2010).

<u>Conclusion</u>

In conclusion, it is clear that a well-represented bookshelf is beneficial for all readers, with the potential for increasing children's sense of self as well as to be able to learn about people, culture and worlds different from their own (CLPE, 2021). As educators, when selecting books, we need to be vigilant to the representation, or absence, of minority groups (Gamble, 2021) and how this can impact children's developing awareness of diverse cultures. As pointed out by the NEU and NCL Anti-racism framework (2022), education plays a crucial role in interrupting racism and challenging negative stereotypes that exist among society. By promoting positive and accurate depictions of diverse cultures through books, we can begin to help children make the world a more equitable place (Thomas, 2016). Therefore, it is recommended that the education sector and book publishing services continue to actively promote the representation of diverse cultures throughout children's literature. The growing demand for this means that there is a huge embodiment of resources available to support schools and teaching staff achieving this. It is highly recommended that schools and teachers familiarise themselves with the works of companies such as (but not exclusive to) the 'CLPE', 'The Black Curriculum', 'Letterbox Libraries', 'We Need Diverse Books' and the 'Free Books Campaign', who provide excellent recourses and book lists to keep up to date with recommendations and new findings.

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Appendix 1: Pictures taken from google used in focus group for assigning adjectives

Appendix 2: For use in focus group – Which child would you want to be friends with? Why?

Appendix 3: For use in focus group – Which child would you want to be friends with? Why?

Appendix 4 – Questionnaire

Q1. This research is being conducted by Izzy Haigh (Izzy.haigh@yorksj.ac.uk) and is being supervised by module lead Manjinder Jagdev (m.jagdev@yorksj.ac.uk).

This questionnaire is designed to explore teachers opinions of diverse cultural awareness in schools, as part of my research project exploring the influence of carefully chosen books on children's diverse cultural awareness.

For the purpose of this research, diverse cultural awareness refers to having awareness of backgrounds different than your own/the children's own.

The survey should take approximately 5 minuets to complete, all information and data will remain confidential.

If you are happy to participate please select 'I consent'.

If at any point you wish to withdraw your participation you can do so by contacting izzy.haigh@yorksj.ac.uk providing your unique pseudonym.

Thank you for your time!

Q2. Having read the above I am happy to consent to completing the questionnaire (if not please exit the survey).

I consent

Q3. How would you rate your cultural awareness?

Poor

Average

Good

Excellent

Q4. Consider the whole school and the local area. In your opinion, how would you rate the diverse cultural awareness of these groups?

	Terrible	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
Children	O	O	O	O	O
Staff	O	O	O	O	O
Wider community	O	O	O	O	O

Q5a. Do you believe that you have adequate resources to support the development of children's diverse cultural awareness?

Yes

No

Not sure

Q5b. Please explain your reasoning

[ ]

Q6. Do you think that the books children have access to in school promote reading for pleasure? Please indicate YES or NO and why.

[ ]

Q7. Do you wish there was more funding for resources and/or training to support the development of children's diverse cultural awareness?

Much more funding is needed for this area

Somewhat believe more funding is needed

I think there is enough funding for this already

I don't believe this area needs more funding

Q8a. Rank these options in order of which you think are most effective ways to develop children's cultural awareness in school.

Books and resources.

Immerse cultural diversity into everyday learning.

Having set days for learning about different cultures.

Inviting members of the community into school.

Q8b. If you can, explain why you chose this order .

[ ]

Q9. Do you agree that books/resources in school can be used to develop children's cultural awareness? Please indicate YES or NO and, if you can, explain why/why not.

[ ]

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.

Powered by Qualtrics

Q10. Do you believe that, in our society, children have a good level of diverse cultural awareness?

Yes

No

Some

Appendix 5 – Interview Questions

- How do you choose what books to purchase for the school?
- Do you think the children are limited or satisfied with the quantity of book choice?
- What type of books are most commonly ordered/prioritised?
- Do you think that children feel well represented in the books available to them?
- According to the CLPE (centre for literacy in primary education), only 7% of children's books feature characters of colour, yet 33.5% of children in UK primary schools are from a minority ethnic background. How does this make you feel?
- To your best knowledge, are the books you purchase socially and culturally up to date? If you had more funding, do you think you would be able to select books that were of more relevance for the children?
- How do you think reading for pleasure could be increased for the children at this school?