

Positive Representation in Literature at WOTH



Positive Representation

Every child has the right to see themselves and their lives represented in the pages of a book. At WOTH we are committed to ensuring that all our students can do that.

Whether this be those living in a single parent family, with black or brown skin, who identify as LGBTQ+, that have a disability or are neurodiverse, those who face economic challenges– all should feel represented by both characters, storylines and information in the books they read.

Well-written and illustrated books break down stereotypes and provide powerful representation for children. They can also help readers to see the world from a different perspective and to understand lives that are different from their own, becoming empathetic citizens.

The 2021 CLPE *Reflecting Realities* report showed that:

Children’s books featuring a minority ethnic character has increased from 4% in 2017 to 15% in 2020 (40% in picture books.)

However, 33.9% of Primary School age children in England are from a minority ethnic background but only 8% of books published featured a main character of a minority ethnic background.

In her 1990 paper *“Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,”* Rudine Sims-Bishop outlines the importance of books representing and reflecting the world:

“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange... However, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.”

Representation matters

Seeing yourself represented in a book can turn a child on to reading. However, misrepresentation through stereotyping or feeling omitted from texts can have the opposite effect. At WOTH we want all students to be given every opportunity to foster a love of reading and our approach to representation must reflect that aim.

How we will create an inclusive school library:

- Complete a comprehensive audit of our shelves and remove any books that are offensive, inaccurate or offer racist or overtly ableist views of the world.
- Pupil voice is powerful. Ask the children to help choose new titles. Look through catalogues and publishers’ pages together. What appeals to them? What reflects their lives, families and experiences? Which books show characters and themes that broaden their understanding of the world?
- Use information sources such as Booktrust Represents and Bookmark to help seek out publishers and ‘own voices’ authors creating representative and inclusive books.
<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-and-campaigns/booktrust-represents/#!?q=&sortOption=MostRecent&pageNo=1>
- Ensure that our school reading materials are produced by a diverse range of authors and illustrators, with a range of lived experiences.

- Take a critical look at the teaching curriculum and ensure it has a diverse range of texts at its heart. Ensure history, science, art and wider curriculum subjects give a broad and representative view of the world and that literature and teaching in these areas reflects this.
- Use the positive impact of online or in person author or poet visits to show all children that everyone can be a writer and a reader.
- Use the library as a safe and inclusive space to celebrate differences and learn.

Book Audit

Staff and library volunteers need to ensure that all reading material in school promotes positive representation. Any new texts should be purchased with this remit in mind and any investment in literature should look to address the current imbalance highlighted by research such as Book Trust Represents.

Diversity and inclusivity are a broad spectrum and can be tricky to define. Along with race/ethnicity and tracking whether books feature characters from minority ethnic backgrounds, we must also consider all protected characteristics, LGBTQ+, disability and neurodiversity, regional differences, socio-economic and religious backgrounds.

Taking Books off the Shelves:

When evaluating current stock, we will consider inappropriate content. Issues are more prevalent in older publications, so we will consider books with earlier publication dates as of greater risk. When evaluating we will consider representation of culture, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, neurodiversity, social status and age and remove anything that is outdated, inaccurate, discriminatory or offensive. We will consider negative stereotyping in relation to all protected characteristics (as per Equality Act 2010) as well as ability, neurodiversity and mental health.

If any staff or volunteer has doubts, they should immediately remove the book. If necessary, a complaint will be lodged with the publisher. In some cases, we may retain the inappropriate content to use as a training resource or to support the Valuing Difference strand of our PSHCE curriculum.

Our Diversity Commitment

- We will audit new book purchases with our diversity aims in mind.
- We will ensure library displays are representative and feature a wide range of backgrounds and interests. Creating a romance display for Valentine's Day? Ensure LGBTQ+ relationships have equal coverage, for instance.
- We will offer diverse recommendations and be willing to recommend a wide range of reading material.

Richard Laing

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