

# Public Research Report

## Understanding and promoting diversity in Primary school libraries



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## 1. Executive Summary

33.1% of UK school children are from a non-white background. In contrast, CLPE statistics released in 2018 show that only 7% of UK published children's books featured a BAME main character.

This research was designed to improve understanding of the levels of diversity in primary schools, and the barriers schools face when trying to diversify their libraries, in order to demonstrate the importance of diversity in children's literature and enable advocacy to improve services in publishing and procurement.

A literature review was conducted to investigate the impact of exposure to diverse and non-diverse literature on children. A second literature review focused on the statutory requirements and national curriculum outcomes schools must meet which could be contributed to by having a diverse school library. Finally, the researchers compiled a survey which was distributed to schools across England, with 86 respondents providing information about the current levels of diversity in their libraries, their procurement processes and barriers to diversification they have faced.

Our research has led us to conclude that under-representation and lack of diversity in school libraries is a wide-spread issue, and that this has real life consequences for both BAME and non-BAME children. However, our survey of schools shows that many librarians and literacy leads are aware of the issue and have a desire to address it.

## 2. Recommendations

The key recommendations are provided for schools and those advocating for diversity education and literature.

### 2.1 Audit current position

The survey results demonstrate that the majority of schools responding felt they had low levels of diverse books in their collections. While it is not imperative to know exact numbers, it would be helpful for schools to have an idea of the diverse books they hold and whether they are representative of a range of cultures and ethnicities. This may help schools advocate for improving their current position if they can identify gaps in their collection.



### 2.2 Dedicate funds



Budget is a clear barrier to diversifying libraries, but there are charities and grants available to help with this. Using the audit and evidence from this research to demonstrate need and apply for funding or to approach local businesses for sponsorship could result in an injection of finance to help stock the library. PTA or school fundraising events specifically to assist the diversification of the library could benefit from using information from this research to explain why the school needs help to improve their current position.

### 2.3 Use expertise

The research found many school staff were unsure where to find diverse books, and that although large companies often have “diversity packs” of books, these often do not meet the needs of the school to represent specific groups of their students. Using smaller, specialist companies can help to curate a bespoke collection and often have links with authors who are self-publishing in order to meet specific requirements which are not necessarily in the mainstream market.



### 2.4 Advocating for diversity



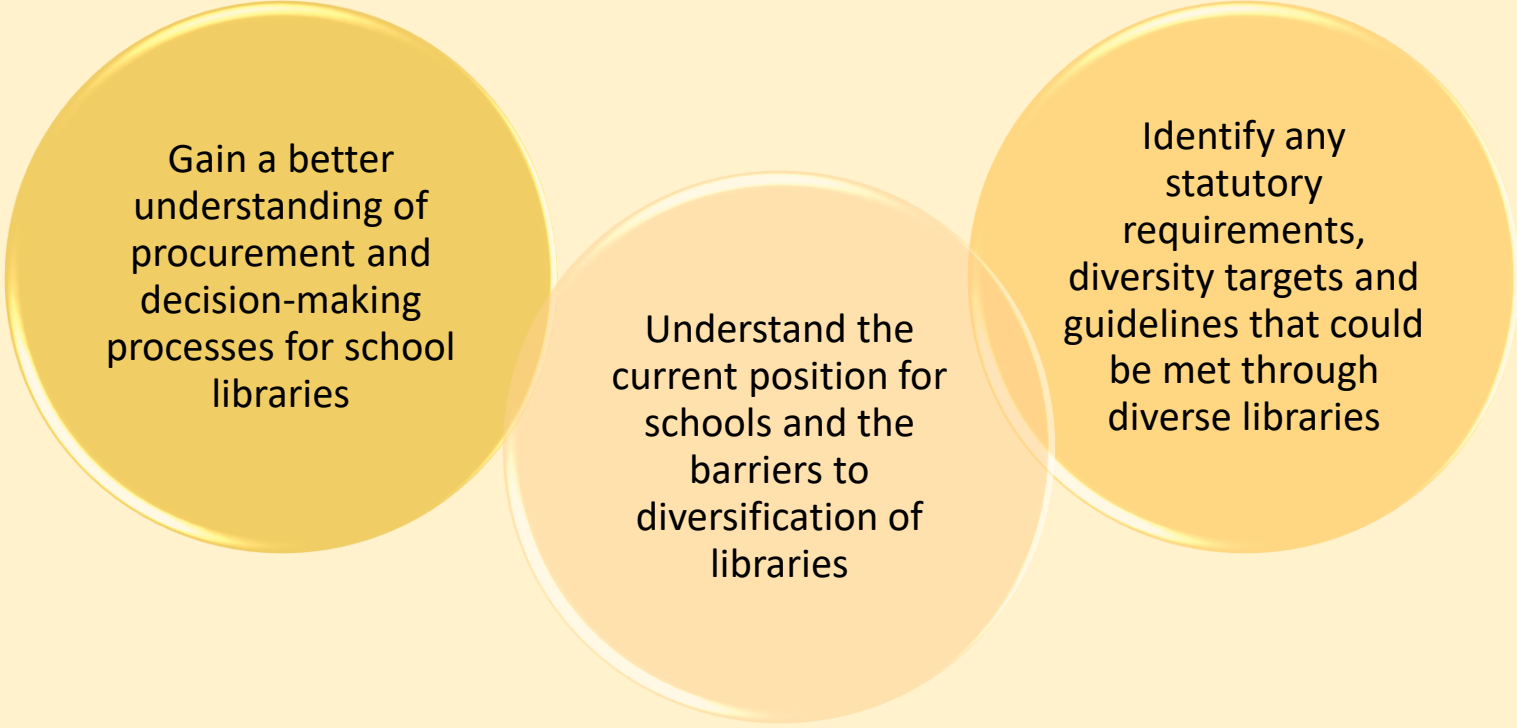
There is clearly a strong demand for books featuring BAME main characters, especially those based in the UK depicted in situations that children can relate to. There is also demand for books by BAME authors and illustrators to provide role models for children. Publishers need to address the imbalance of books and authors they work with to meet this demand. Booksellers need to ensure they market diverse books on an equal basis to those containing white or animal characters and should work with self-publishing authors to enable a broader choice for schools and consumers.

### 3. The Project

The researchers adopted a well planned but adaptive approach to project management to ensure both the desk-based literature reviews and consultation with schools was conducted rigorously and positively.

#### 3.1 Objectives

The core aims of the project are to:



Gain a better understanding of procurement and decision-making processes for school libraries

Understand the current position for schools and the barriers to diversification of libraries

Identify any statutory requirements, diversity targets and guidelines that could be met through diverse libraries

#### 3.2 Method

The approach to meeting the objectives consisted of four stages:

##### 3.2.1 Research on diversity in school libraries

At this stage we collated existing research around diversity in school libraries, looking specifically at:

- Identity and self-esteem of BAME students linked to representation in literature
- The importance of diverse literature for non-BAME children
- Current trends of representation in children's books

##### 3.2.2 Research on statutory frameworks and curriculum guidelines

This stage consisted of desk-based research into school statutory requirements which having a diverse library could help schools to achieve, including:

- Ofsted and Department for Education frameworks and curriculum
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSCD); personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE); and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) frameworks
- Citizenship and British Values

### 3.2.3 Collection of anecdotal evidence

We began with informal gathering of anecdotal evidence from six primary school known to the research team. This evidence was used to inform the design of a questionnaire later sent out to schools across the country. This stage took the form of oral conversations and online communication, in which respondents commented on themes including:

- The procurement processes used by the school
- Existing considerations around diversity when stocking the school library
- Whether the school library and its collection are used towards meeting statutory obligations

The schools that were used at this stage have existing links with the researchers, either through their own children attending them or through their PhD research or work. The schools were located in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Greater Manchester and Widnes, enabling a comparison of different Local Authority approaches.

### 3.2.4 Survey for schools

A questionnaire was devised using Survey Monkey and sent to 6420 schools via email. Different geographic areas were targeted to ensure any patterns in the data were not solely down to the Local Authority of the school. These included cities, rural areas and entire counties chosen to ensure a representative sample of settlement sizes, demographics and geographic areas across England. In total we received 86 responses from 44 different postcodes.

The questionnaire was also shared on UK based social media groups targeted at primary school teachers. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions and was designed to take no more than 3 minutes to complete, using a majority of multiple-choice answers.

The topics featured in the questionnaire included:

- The current level of diversity in the school's library collection
- Barriers the school have experienced to increasing the level of diversity
- Procurement processes for books
- Current providers used and the perception of the diversity of the range they offer

Geographic Area	Schools Contacted	Responses Received
Bristol	20	1
Cleveland	80	1
Manchester	136	6
Bedfordshire	140	5
Leicester	149	1
Somerset	154	1
East Sussex	193	12
Buckinghamshire	246	1
Tyne and Weir	319	0
Essex	331	7
Staffordshire	332	2
Nottinghamshire	360	0
Merseyside	378	6
Cumbria	396	0
Derbyshire	402	2
South Yorkshire	411	7
Surrey	466	9
West Midlands	510	4
Kent	636	7
Lancashire	761	14

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Current levels of diversity in school libraries

*“Not at all satisfactory, all children should have clear role models in literacy, ones that reflect their own cultural backgrounds but also allows them to explore the backgrounds of other cultures separate from their own”*

The survey found an almost universal acceptance that the current level of diverse literature is unsatisfactory, clearly demonstrating that not only is there an extensive need for more diverse books, but that school staff are acutely aware of this gap and keen to address it.

### 4.2 Barriers to diversifying libraries

*“I find it extremely difficult to find books with the main character from an ethnic minority background and even harder to find books where the author is from an ethnic minority background... It is easier to buy American books, but I would like to buy books about British children and characters. It is almost impossible to buy books about mixed race characters”*

The main barriers faced by schools were funding and access to diverse books. Many had libraries with a legacy of traditional, non-diverse, titles which would take time and financial input to replace.

### 4.3 Procurement processes

*“...sometimes packs, sometimes individual. From wherever we can get the best price, whether that is a bookshop, amazon or even Facebook marketplace.”*

There appears to be a vast disparity between the funding and purchasing situations across schools. Some have been unable to buy books for several years due to funding, others rely on donations of second-hand books which limit their choices, while others purchase books every term at least.

**65%** with less than 15% of books in their library with BAME main characters

**92%** felt the current diversity of their library is unsatisfactory

**34%** stated funding was the main barrier to diversifying their library

**26%** thought there were not enough diverse books available to purchase

**57%** choose books based on their own pupils' interests and demography

**43%** based on recommendations or popularity

**31%** linked to curriculum topics

**33%** to represent a diverse range of people

**83%** purchase books infrequently or ad-hoc

**64%** choose individual books from large or small companies **99%** would use a small independent seller

**93%** use funds from the annual school budget to purchase books

**55%** use fundraising, grants or sponsorship



## 4.4 The importance of diverse literature for BAME children

*“When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society they are a part of.”*

Dr Rudine Sims-Bishop

There is an established correlation between reading and academic development, with reading being one of the most effective and efficient ways to promote the acquisition of vocabulary, critical thinking and comprehension. Children are more likely to develop a love of reading when they are able to identify with the characters and situations found in books therefore realistic depictions of cultural ideologies are imperative for children from all ethnic backgrounds.

## 4.5 The importance of diverse literature for non-minority children

*“For those children who are socially isolated within their own group, and do not get to, or are unable to experience other cultures, books may offer an opportunity for children to ‘meet’ people unlike themselves.”*

Dr Rudine Sims-Bishop

Growing up physically surrounded only by people like themselves, and also only seeing people like themselves reflected in the books that they read, may lead to an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world, which is naturally problematic. Non-minority children need books that portray the very real nature of the world, and not just reflect those that are imaginary, whimsical or familiar to them. Specifically, they need books that will open their eyes to the nature of the world they live in and ground them in their place within a multicultural society.

## 4.6 The DfE frameworks evidenced through diverse library collections

*“Further tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions by enabling students to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures.”*

Department for Education

The DfE’s Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development framework states the importance of promoting tolerance and exposure to other cultures and encourages schools to provide activities beyond the classroom to contribute to this learning. The British Values include specific values to be evidenced by schools including mutual respect and tolerance, with Ofsted recognising both curricular and extra-curricular activities to meet them. Ensuring library collections are diverse and consciously promoting reading and activities around diverse books can demonstrate one element of the school’s action plan to meet DfE and Ofsted guidelines around tolerance and inclusion.

## 5. Conclusion

The initial literature review shows that there is an overwhelming need for increased diversity and representation in our school libraries as a lack of diversity can have real-life consequences for both minority-ethnic and majority-ethnic children. Despite this, the Department of Education does not provide explicit instructions regarding what kinds of books libraries and teachers ought to use therefore school staff are finding themselves having to complete independent research to source titles and reverse the legacies of old-fashioned and predominately white books filling their libraries.

The statutory framework research demonstrates that schools are not merely expected to transmit knowledge to children, but to raise well-rounded and thoughtful human beings who hold certain values and display desired character traits. Diverse books are a valid tool to help schools meet these outcomes.

The results of the survey align with those published by the Book Trust and other sources as described in the literature review section of the research report, that the number of diverse books is increasing and that this increase in availability is slowly reaching school libraries. It does highlight the issues beyond availability felt by schools however, namely funding and how this not only affects their ability to buy books at all but also how it influences their suppliers which can result in restricted choice and less access to diverse titles.

While it is encouraging to note that school staff recognise the lack of diversity in their own schools, and are prioritising this, it must be acknowledged that for many this is a “new thing” to be considered despite it being a problem going back through generations of school children in the UK. It is essential that the publishing industry realises and meets the demand for ethnic minority authors, illustrators and protagonists to ensure that diversifying libraries is a natural progression for schools when purchasing books to redress the imbalance currently seen.

## 6. Appendices

Full Research Report

School Survey

