

Representation in children's literature

BookTrust's response to two new studies on representation – summary

Introduction

BookTrust wants to get every child reading, regularly and by choice. We support families to establish routines of reading together as early as possible and our interventions continue for older children as they transition into independent readers.

We focus on supporting low-income children and those from vulnerable family backgrounds on their reading journeys, so they can experience the lifelong benefits of reading. We know that reading contributes to improved health and wellbeing, creativity and educational outcomes and life opportunities. Our work towards these outcomes for children has never been more important or urgent; challenging economic circumstances and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have had adverse effects for all children, disproportionately affecting those from low-income families.

BookTrust's work is based on extensive and expanding evidence which informs the design of our interventions to get children and families reading. We know that representation is one of a series of important mechanisms that can motivate children to read. Diversity and representation in stories, characters and illustrations in children's literature affect how young readers see themselves, different lives and cultures, and the world around them. Diverse, inclusive and representative children's literature can ensure that children benefit from a richness of perspective, nuance in narrative and good stories from the earliest age.

Within our mission to get children reading, BookTrust works on issues of representation and diversity through a range of interventions, partnerships and learning activities. These include our contribution to ensuring a representative body of children's literature now and in the future, and ensuring that children have access to and engage with this literature.

We are committed to learning how we can best contribute to and sustain representation in children's literature. It is in this context that we are delighted to share findings from two BookTrust learning activities with our valued network of creators, publishers of children's literature, peer organisations and practitioners working in education and child development:

- **The first is an independent study (led by Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold) which tracks the experiences and representation of creators of colour in UK children's publishing. This is our third study on this theme since 2019.**
- **The second is an internal evaluation of a programme for schools which supports authors and illustrators of colour to engage with students via virtual and face-to-face events.**

This short paper summarises findings from these two studies and provides an overview of BookTrust's contribution to strengthening representation in children's literature. (You can find the full reports at www.booktrust.org.uk/represents-research.)

BookTrust is launching these studies at a moment when other organisations in the reading and literacy sector are sharing new research on allied themes. This provides an opportunity to learn from our work alongside lessons from CLPE's Reflecting Realities 2022 report and National Literacy Trust's latest research on the importance and impact of representation in children's literature. We look forward to working with these organisations and other partners to continue to strengthen representation across children's literature.

Summary of findings and recommendations from two new studies



Study 1: Representation of people of colour among children's book creators in the UK

November 2022 (Independent, mixed methods research)

This study has been tracking the percentage of new books published in UK children's literature by creators (authors and illustrators) of colour since 2007. Alongside analysis to track changes in numbers of creators of colour over time, this report also explores the individual experiences of a sample of 20 creators of colour.

To note: this study is not intended as a 'state of the nation' review of representation in the children's publishing sector – it does not, for example, map the range of activities contributing to representation, overall market or business data, or include wider sector voices (including those of creators with other protected characteristics, or the publishing sector).

Key Study Findings

1 The percentage of children's creators of colour has steadily increased since our earliest tracking data:

- In 2007, 4% of newly published children's book creators were people of colour. This increased slightly to 5.6% by 2017. This latest report finds that in 2021, 11.7% of newly published children's book creators were people of colour.
- BookTrust had set a target for at least 13% of newly published children's book creators to be creators of colour by 2022. It appears that the sector is on track to meet this target.

2 The landscape in which creators of colour are working has evolved significantly in the last five years and the creators interviewed report important positive enablers including:

- Strong relationships with publishers and longer-term investment in the careers of creators of colour.
- Allies in children's literature who are pushing for change.
- School visits involving creators of colour, which are motivating to both creators and their audiences, and are improving discoverability and the visibility of creative role models for children.
- The focus on diversity, sustained by research and campaigns providing a platform to continue to create change.

3 However, the conversations with creators indicate that serious issues remain, including:

- Concerns that issues of inclusion and underrepresentation risk being addressed as 'tick box exercises' when sustained, meaningful change requires long-term commitment, engagement and investment for creators of colour.
- Experiences of inequality within the creative and publishing process, indicating that systemic change is still needed and takes time and sustained focus.
- The impact of these issues on creators' finances, mental wellbeing and, ultimately, their ability to contribute to children's literature.

Study 2: BookTrust Represents School Support: Learnings from 2021–22



October 2022 (BookTrust, mixed methods evaluation)

This small-scale evaluation is based on interviews with school staff and school pupils in four primary schools participating in our current BookTrust primary school programme, and creators involved in the programme.

In the 2021–22 academic year we reached 48,800 children with our virtual and in-person school visits by creators of colour, providing 50,705 books by creators of colour to schools and supporting 406 creators of colour through wider development opportunities.

Key Study Findings

- 1** Many schools recognise the importance of representation in their books and school curriculum. They want their pupils to read a diverse range of books with characters, themes and creators who reflect the diversity of contemporary UK.
- 2** Schools face challenges in their work on representation. Interviewees cite barriers including budgetary constraints, lack of time to discover new books and not having the knowledge and skills to effectively engage children in conversations about diversity.
- 3** Schools regard BookTrust Represents as an important and impactful programme in supporting engagement with representation and with reading. Schools engage well with the programme. Component parts of the offer (book gifting, author visits, shared reading of a BookTrust Represents text) impact on children's engagement and their reading and writing behaviours. The programme supports schools in their work to strengthen engagement with representation in a way that is engaging and accessible for teachers.
- 4** From the creators' perspective, BookTrust Represents supports and promotes their work. Creators value other aspects of career development, including building their networks and helping to grow their confidence.



Lessons from these studies for BookTrust and reflections for the wider children's literature sector

These two important studies make clear the importance of strong, continued efforts to:

- Maintain progress in and further improve representation in UK children's literature both among creators and in the diversity of characters, stories and experiences represented.
- Maintain and further strengthen engagement from children and their reading influencers with diverse and representative children's books.



There has been significant progress towards each of these over the last decade. A community of creators, reading organisations, publishers and other influencers have been raising awareness of challenges around improved representation, highlighting and supporting opportunities and contributing to positive change.

However, these improvements in children's literature are recent; their positive impact is seen in the increased proportion of representative works in recent and new children's literature, while the UK's body of children's literature overall remains far from representative. There is a strong imperative to continue to work to ensure improvements are sustained.

BookTrust's commitment and contribution to supporting representation in UK children's literature

Representation in children's literature matters for the children and families BookTrust seeks to support. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds are overrepresented in our target audience group – 31% of children in poverty are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Our mission to get children reading has never been more urgent and we see representation as critical to this mission. Representation is at the heart of BookTrust's work in schools and our co-creation work to design new approaches to getting children reading. It informs how we select and review books, which are a key element of the support we provide to practitioners and families from the earliest moments in children's reading journeys.

BookTrust's contribution to representation in children's literature relies on partnership and co-creation with children and families, creators, publishing partners and practitioners with expertise in supporting low-income and vulnerable families. In response to the studies outlined in this document and the wider body of evidence on representation, we commit to continuing our work to ensure the future of representation in children's literature and children's future engagement with inclusive books.





In our work with **families and practitioner partners** we will:

- Ensure **representation remains central to how we commission and select books** and resources in our interventions for families of all ages, and for our partners who work directly with children.
- Ensure **representation remains at the heart of our work to promote and recommend books** for children of all ages – with a particular focus on new, high-quality books.
- Strengthen our work, through schools and other interventions to identify and motivate reading influencers (families, creators, teachers, library staff, other community partners) who, in turn, **support children's access to and engagement with diverse reading materials**.



In our work with **publishers and creators** we will:

- Continue to **promote the work of authors and illustrators of colour through our book selection processes** across our scaled offers (including BookTrust Represents, Bookbuzz and our new Early Years offers).
- Continue to **provide and promote development opportunities for creators of colour**, including through our interventions for children and families, through signposting to organisations and networks providing support to creators, and through providing ongoing opportunities for creators to connect with our publisher partners.
- **Call for our partners' continued focus on and contribution to improved representation** as part of sector-wide efforts to achieve sustained change.
- **Support and connect organisations and individuals who are allies and champions of representation** through our communications work.



In our **learning and development** work we will:

- Continue to **learn about the need for and impact of representation for our target audience families** – as BookTrust evolves its wider programme of work we are learning how we can best support behaviour change in reading.
- Continue to **co-design our interventions with families, practitioners, creators and other reading influencers who are representative** of contemporary Britain.
- Continue to **learn with underrepresented creators** in children's literature.



Important to note:

- Some elements of these commitments reflect long-standing BookTrust activities, others are initiatives that we are evolving in line with our new [strategy](#).
- As we work to improve our support to families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland we will continue to extend the ways that we support representation in children's literature that reflects all aspects of contemporary UK. BookTrust's work on representation from the perspective of ethnicity will remain a vital strand of our work.

Reflections for the wider children's literature sector

BookTrust needs diverse and inclusive children's books to deliver our mission to get children reading. As highlighted so clearly in the *Representation of people of colour among children's book creators in the UK* study, sustained change on the complex journey to representative UK children's literature demands scaled, coordinated and sustained efforts. Some of the changes required are specific to the children's literature sector. Others relate to wider systemic changes.

The journey to sustained representation in children's literature has involved and will continue to involve different actors tackling a multitude of issues. The two new studies we are sharing suggest that the following will continue to play an important role:

- Maintaining focus on issues of diversity, inclusion and representation across UK children's literature.
- Sharing lessons from learning and research activities, including creators' experiences.
- Ensuring positive experiences and opportunities for new creators and supporting creators' long-term career development.
- Supporting, maintaining and championing networks and support systems for creators.
- Recognising, connecting and empowering allies who champion representation within our sector and individual organisations.
- Ensuring children and families can discover and access representative literature.
- Supporting those who influence children's reading to engage with representative books.

BookTrust is sharing this research and calling for efforts towards representation to be sustained in these particularly challenging economic circumstances; we know that the families we seek to engage and all our partners are facing challenges and competing priorities.



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