

Developing trainee teachers' understanding of representations of diversity in children's picture books: did initial teacher training learning impact on Newly Qualified Teachers' practice?

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Abstract

The University of East London (UEL) is based in the London borough of Newham: one of the most diverse boroughs in Britain, with one of the highest levels of child poverty (Campaign to End Child Poverty 2012; Office for National Statistics 2012). In the academic year 2012/13, trainee teachers on the Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) with English subject specialism investigated picture books to create a virtual London Picture Books collection. These trainee teachers' learning was investigated (Baker 2013) through semi-structured interviews with six trainees. The ongoing impact of the task on the practice of three Newly Qualified Teachers was assessed through semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: Diversity; multicultural; picture books; Initial Teacher Education; London; reading

Introduction

On the Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), initial teacher education is in the context of preparing trainee teachers for professional practice in culturally diverse, inclusive and multilingual schools.

UEL offers Primary PGCEs with a subject focus. In 2012/13, Primary PGCE with English had 48 trainees. Inspired by Dr Nicola Daly's New Zealand Picture Books collection (www.picturebooks.co.nz), I decided to organise Primary with English trainees into small groups and set them the task of selecting a picture book representing London. Each group wrote a rationale explaining why the book represented London, and these were uploaded to a blog (<http://londonpicturebook.wordpress.com/>). Six participants volunteered to be interviewed for a study to evaluate the impact of the task.

After analysing the conversations with the participants, the following themes emerged:

- identity
- families
- potential use of picture books in the classroom.

I concluded that even among a group of trainees who had chosen to pursue extra study in English during their PGCE work, issues of representation and diversity in picture books need to be addressed explicitly (Baker 2013). Prior to carrying out the task, trainees had not considered whether the books in their placement classrooms represented the cultural diversity of their classes. However, they were determined to ensure that their own classes would have books with positive depictions of diversity. During their induction year, their first year as qualified teachers, I carried out follow-up interviews with three volunteer trainees. This article seeks to share my learning and conclusions from this research.

Background reading

My article (Baker 2013) outlined the importance of visible representations of diversity in children's picture books. For example, one trainee outlined how a lack of visible representations of his experience put him off reading:

'I'm gay. I never really read anything that helped me understand it. At primary school we would read [traditional tale] books where the heroes were all saving the ladies, and in the end they'd get married, and I'd just sit there and not really... I'd think, why isn't a lady saving the lady, or why isn't the lady saving the hero? I just couldn't relate to it.'

This demonstrates the importance of ensuring that a range of stories are told, and heard by primary pupils. Another trainee, who had studied creative writing as part of her BA degree, stated that she only ever wrote about 'British British [sic – White British] people' (Baker 2013: 84) despite *her self-described*

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British Asian background, as she did not have access to books about British Asian characters when she was at primary school. The new English Curriculum (September 2013, to be delivered in schools from September 2014) states that pupils should read widely 'to develop their knowledge of themselves and the world in which they live, to establish an appreciation and love of reading, and to gain knowledge across the curriculum' (Department for Education 2013: 4). In addition, Teachers' Standard 3 (the standards that all qualified teachers must demonstrate that they meet for professional status to be conferred) states that teachers must 'have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject(s) and curriculum areas, foster and maintain pupils' interest in the subject, and address misunderstandings' (Department for Education 2011: 11). Both of these documents, mandatory for initial teacher education in England, suggest that a trainee teacher must have knowledge of a range of children's literature.

Research

I conducted semi-structured interviews to allow Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) to discuss their opinions and experiences, relevant to their own employment settings. Of my six original participants, three agreed to take part in this research. Trainees A–F took part in my original research; for clarity I have kept their original pseudonyms.

Trainees A and C are employed full time. Trainee A is employed in a highly diverse inner city north-east London school which serves both small blocks of social housing and owner-occupied terraced housing. At the time of the interviews she taught Year 2 (six- and seven-year-olds). Trainee C teaches in a very large school on the outskirts of east London that serves an extremely deprived estate of social housing, with an increasingly diverse school population. She was teaching Year 4 (eight- and nine-year-olds). Trainee D opted to take short-term contracts while pursuing further studies. At the time of her interview, she was working in a large school in a very diverse part of outer London in a Year 3 class (seven- and eight-year-olds). The relevance of these demographics will be discussed below.

All three trainees discussed the constraints in choosing books for their classrooms; trainee A because her school follows a reading scheme, trainee C because her school is multi-form entry and the texts for her year group had been chosen before she started, and trainee D because she was covering a class temporarily, where the substantive teacher had already chosen the class texts.

However, trainees A and C found that they had some autonomy over selecting books to read to their classes or for the class's book corner. Trainee A noted that the reading scheme books were 'boring' so she supplemented them with 'more interesting books. I have read them some of the books we read for [shadowing] the UKLA [United Kingdom Literacy Association] book awards.' Trainee C's class is made up of 17 girls and 13 boys, but she felt that as the books chosen by her colleagues for Literacy lessons all had boy protagonists, it was important to choose books with girl protagonists for the class book corner: 'There are differences in the books the boys and girls choose for independent reading: girls choose books with girls in – or scary books!' Trainee A also discussed gender and reading in her class: 'I read Babette Cole's *Princess Smartypants* after a girl said she'd been watching *Batman*, and a boy replied "Girls can't watch *Batman*!" I told him "I'm a girl, and I watch *Batman*."'

Trainee A felt that it wasn't enough to have multicultural books in the classroom; the quality of text mattered too: 'I want to show different cultures and diversity, but I think it only works if they're good books. Some of the books I was given for Black History Month had very poor pictures, and were boring and moralistic. They were 10–15 years old. I must admit I didn't read them to the children.' Her understanding of diversity is wider than books with characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds:

'I have bought some books that are related to gender, sexuality and different types of families. One is Freddie and the fairy by Julia Donaldson. The story addresses the issue of deafness, and the children shared their family experiences of deaf grandparents and other relatives.'

Trainee's name	Self-described gender	Self-described ethnicity	Age band
A	Female	White British	35+
C	Female	White British	24–30
D	Female	British Indian	21–23

I read them a book with a wheelchair user [protagonist] – the wheelchair was visible but never mentioned. It wasn't a moralistic book. I ask the children what they like and don't like about a book. I read them a book called Rainbow about a rabbit losing its teeth. They enjoyed it because they are losing their teeth. They love The great big book of families by Mary Hoffman, because there is such diversity in my class. They love seeing families like theirs.'

Trainee A stressed that it was important to have a variety of books featuring a variety of characters and experiences. However, the quality of the text and the children's response was paramount to her: 'I ask the children what they like and don't like about a book.' All three trainees felt that they approached book selection for their classes differently after being involved in the London Picture Books collection. Trainee C said, 'I do choose books for independent reading that will engage them,' with a particular focus on positive representations of girl characters.

Trainee D said, 'Sometimes children say "Oh look miss, she's wearing a hijab like you". Since doing the task I feel it's more important to choose books representative of the class.' There are many Muslim children in the school that trainee D was teaching in, so it was important not only for the Muslim children to see families like theirs in books, but also for the children of other faiths or none. Trainee A said, 'I don't just randomly pick up books. I think about how and why I'm going to use them in class, and that's in response to the [London Picture Books] project.' It is clear that they felt that the task was valuable and had had an impact on their practice. All the trainees explicitly stated that they were considering the diversity of their classes in terms of gender, ethnicity, religious and cultural background, families and disabilities. As trainee A stated, 'They love *The great big book of families* by Mary Hoffman, because there is such diversity in my class. They love seeing families like theirs.'

Conclusion

It is important that teacher educators raise issues of representations of diversity in children's picture books with trainee teachers, while recognising that NQTs have varied experiences of autonomy in their choice of reading materials for their classes, depending on their setting. It is also important to point out that as NQTs, trainees will have the freedom to choose books for a class library or book corner, and to read at story time. We need to ensure that they consider diversity

in its widest sense – gender, ethnicity, family make-up, dis/ability and economic background – and have wide enough knowledge of children's books so that they can choose books that will both represent the experiences of children in their classes and introduce them to other ways of living.

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