

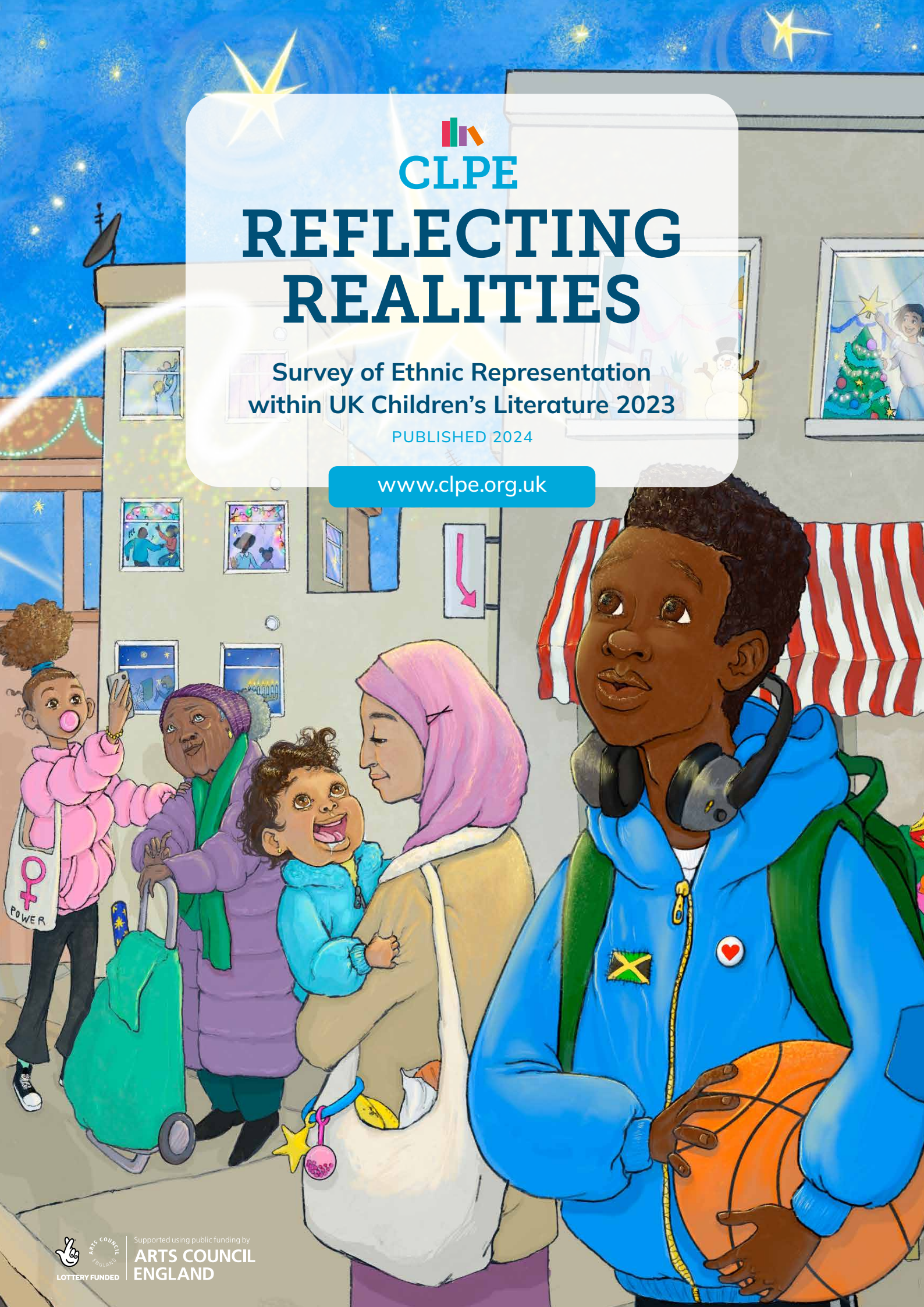


REFLECTING REALITIES

Survey of Ethnic Representation
within UK Children's Literature 2023

PUBLISHED 2024

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Foreword

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Research and Development Director CLPE

This is the seventh publication in the Reflecting Realities annual survey series. These surveys provide insights into the extent and quality of ethnic representation in children's literature published in the UK. For over seven years now, we have collated, reviewed, and reported on the books that publishers have diligently submitted to enable this work. To ensure a broad perspective, this survey should be read within this wider context and in conjunction with the previous six [publications](#). For readers familiar with this annual survey, you will know that this work involves CLPE undertaking an annual call out to UK publishers both large and small, inviting them to submit any titles they believe satisfy the eligibility criteria for our team to read and review. The process for collecting, reviewing, analysing and reporting the data involves a long step by step methodology that was designed in the first year of this work to enable us to provide a meaningful snapshot of the output of UK children's publishing. The methodology we use to collect and scrutinise the data that forms the basis of this report is outlined in more detail [here](#).

The surveys have become an established part of the publishing landscape, contributing to a wider body of advocacy calling for better inclusion in children's literature echoed across the publishing, education and charity sectors. These reports seek to provide data and guidance, as well as highlighting exemplary titles and offering constructive critique to support efforts to advance the drive for ensuring that high quality ethnically inclusive literature is a standard feature of bookshelves far and wide.

If you have followed this work, you will know that we have observed significant and consistent growth in the volume of children's literature featuring racially minoritised¹ characters and casts, a trajectory that has been remarkable given the particularly low baseline established in the first report in the series. In the first six years of this work we were buoyed by the phenomenal response and efforts of the publishing industry which enabled us to report a consistent year on year increase in the volume of inclusive and representative literature being published. To increase the volume of inclusive output from 4% to 30% and ensure that there are significantly more representative titles available to young readers in the space of six years is a tremendous feat.

In this year's survey for the first time in the history of this work, we will be reporting a significant decrease in the presence of racially minoritised characters in the overall output. Specifically, we have observed drops in presence in two of the three text types we review, as well as a reduction in the number of main characters from a racially minoritised background.



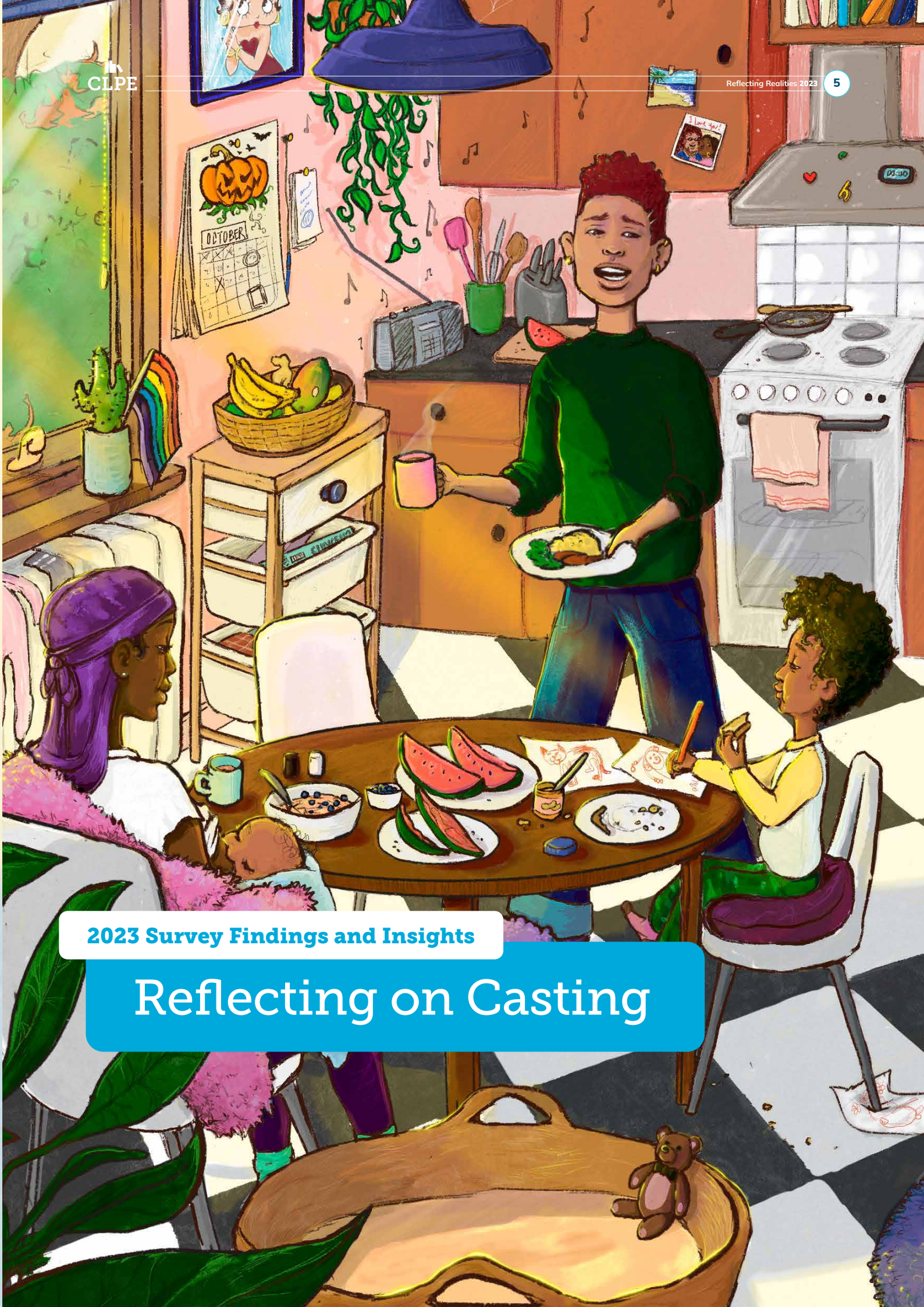
¹This is a term that aims to recognise that individuals have been actively minoritised through social processes of power and domination, rather than just existing in distinct statistical minorities. This term speaks to an understanding that some groups have been treated differently and subjugated (minoritised) because of their racial identities, within a context of a racial hierarchy. This term is less well used in the mainstream but is increasingly preferred by some who wish to capture the importance of power when talking about race.' (Short Guide to Understanding Race and Ethnicity Language and Terminology Race Equality Action Group – Queen Mary University of London)

Whilst this is disappointing, we have always expressed cautious optimism regarding the increased output of recent years. Our fundamental concern has been that the consistency of the upward trajectory could have the potential to invite complacency, reducing the successes of this period to a trend. Historical patterns would indicate that gains regarding inclusion are susceptible to being constrained by the cyclical nature of publishing trends. It is therefore not surprising that in the seventh year of this work, the itch has set in and the tremendous gains made to date are at risk of being compromised if efforts subside.

The advocacy of booksellers, librarians, care-givers, teachers, creatives and many others remain constant. However, the ways in which the industry responds have historically ebbed and flowed like waves on a shore. With every gain made a little more of a mark remains in the sand but until the foundations are solidified, sustained change will always be challenging to achieve.

We advise readers to absorb the content of this report, contemplate the recommendations and keep moving forward so that the figures in this year's survey become a blip rather than an irreconcilable downturn. To roll back the important gains made in the first six years of monitoring would compromise the quality of classroom bookshelves and be detrimental to children's reading experiences. Over this period, emerging and established writers and illustrators of colour have continued to produce awe-inspiring, thought provoking, innovative and exceptional work. And a cognisant approach to inclusion has been more evident in the works of all writers regardless of their backgrounds. As with previous reports we have had the privilege of reviewing some phenomenal titles which offer a glimpse into the infinite possibilities that the drive for inclusion can afford the literary space. The momentum of this period has opened many doors, we hope that the insights provided here will help to keep these firmly open.

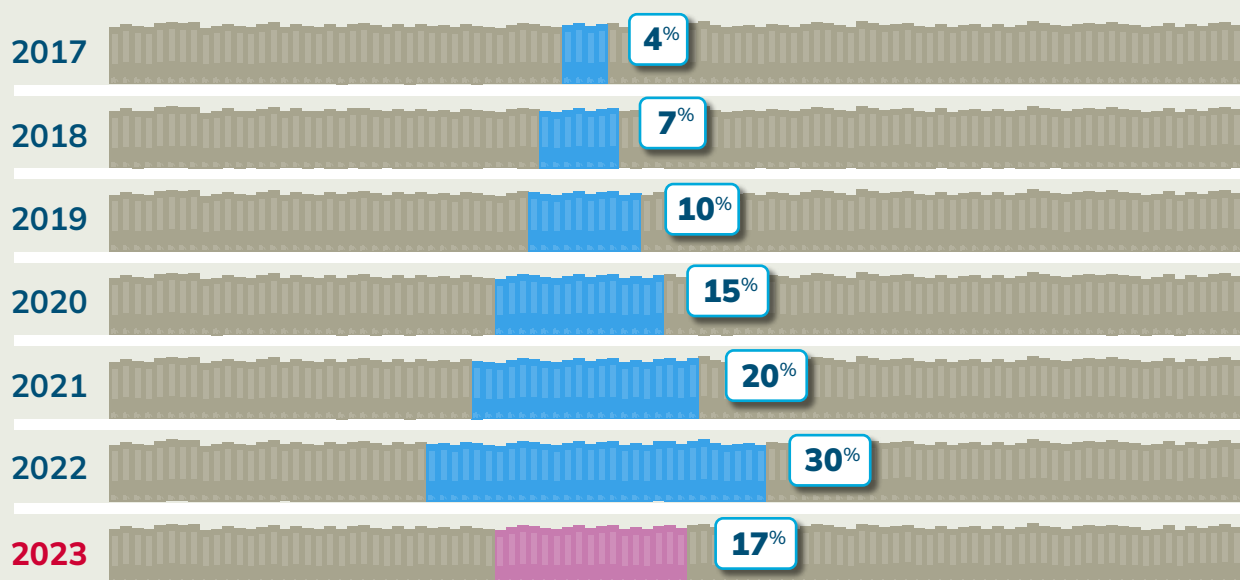




2023 Survey Findings and Insights

Reflecting on Casting

**Percentage of Children's Books Published
featuring Racially Minoritised Characters (FIG. 1)**



Overall Output

5,884 children's picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction titles published in the UK in 2023 were eligible for the consideration of this study. This is a marked increase in the volume of eligible titles compared to the previous report. Of these titles, 999 featured racially minoritised characters. This indicates that 17% of the children's picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction titles published in 2023 featured racially minoritised characters, compared to 30% in 2022, 20% in 2021, 15% in 2020, 10% in 2019, 7% in 2018 and 4% in 2017.

To enable the publication of the sixth report, we reviewed 954 titles published in 2022. For the purposes of this, our seventh report, we have reviewed 999 titles published in 2023. There is very little distinction between the number of eligible titles reviewed for this report compared to the number of eligible titles reviewed for the report published last year. However, the figure for the overall number of titles published in this cycle is far greater than the overall number of titles reported in last year's survey. The overall number of published titles we have seen in this year's report is more aligned with the figures reported in the 2020 and 2021 reports. This suggests that although the industry output hasn't entirely resumed pre-covid levels there is a steady return towards this.

Most significantly for the purposes of this study, the 17% figure marks the first ever drop in the overall

production of representative titles. The number of published children's books featuring racially minoritised characters has dropped by 12 percentage points. In the last reporting cycle fewer titles were published overall but the proportion of representative titles that made up this overall output was not compromised. In this, the seventh reporting cycle, we have seen the opposite to be the case. We have observed an increase in overall output and a decrease in the number of representative titles published.

We review titles aimed at a 3-11 readership. We note the target audience for each title submitted as part of the review process. It has been interesting to observe that since the second report in this series, titles aimed at the older age range of 8 (+) have consistently made up the largest proportion of the submissions, with titles aimed at 5-8 year olds coming in second and titles aimed at 3-5 year olds making up the smallest proportion of the submissions. It is unclear why there isn't more parity across the age groups particularly given the drive to increase the output of representative literature over this period. The drop in volume of representative titles combined with the presence that is available being skewed towards titles aimed at older readers could delay the opportunity for younger readers to encounter racially minoritised protagonists and casts of characters. This reduces the scope for books to serve as sources of affirmation, education and insight as well as supporting critical thinking.

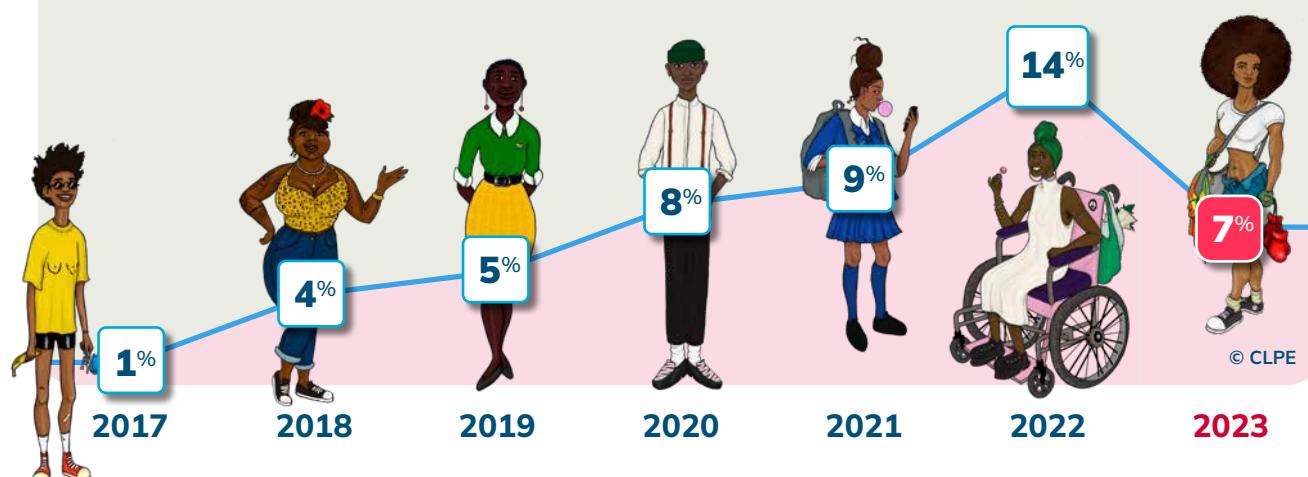
The implication of fewer representative titles being produced creates a twofold predicament. Most obviously it increases the absence of racially minoritised characters and serves as a form of erasure. Additionally, it increases the burden on representative titles that are produced to compensate for the lack of presence on the shelf. This pressure can compromise creative licence by potentially narrowing the types of stories that are told and how they are told. The greater the volume of inclusive titles, the more scope we have for a variety of representations. We have emphasised throughout that considerations about quantity of output must go hand in hand with ensuring a high quality of representations. This is why we review the types of representations available and evaluate how racially minoritised individuals are portrayed. High quality representations require readers to have access to thoughtfully crafted, varied and nuanced characterisations, contexts and narratives. A reader's capacity to form connections with characters relies on the skill of a writer to craft complex personalities that evoke thoughts, feelings and relatable characteristics which ultimately lead to investment from the reader. The connections forged on the page have the power to corroborate or change stories that are told beyond the page. While mainstream discourse in matters of race, identity, migration and belonging can be contentious, many of the books being published for children today offer models of how to discuss these concepts with respect. High quality representative books in particular can be affirming whilst also challenging thinking. This is why the drop in output

must not be met with despondency. Instead, the industry must remain committed to improving the volume and quality of its output in this area whilst continuing to interrogate its practices and investment.

Children's Books Published featuring a Main Character from a Racially Minoritised Background

Presence matters and by extension the nature and positioning of this presence is equally if not more important. Where are racially minoritised characters present in the books and how? On a macro level, these questions will pertain to the text type and genre as well as the target age of the titles. On a more micro level, these questions will relate to the casting. Is the character central to the narrative, forming part of the main cast or are they located in the background? As well as positioning, how are they characterised, how are they portrayed? Since the inception of this work, we have observed a steady increase of books featuring main characters from racially minoritised backgrounds. The 1% figure reported in the first reporting cycle provided a stark insight into the extent of the work required to improve output. The most significant gain achieved to date was in the sixth report, in which we were able to report a double figure percentage total for the first time. In this, the seventh report, the decrease in the volume of representative titles published corresponds with a decrease in the presence of main characters from racially minoritised backgrounds.

Percentage of Children's Books Published featuring a Main Character from a Racially Minoritised Background (FIG. 2)

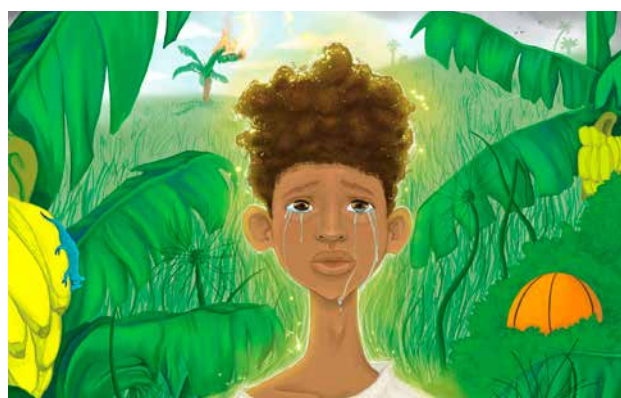


The percentage of children's books published in the UK in 2023 that featured a main character from a racially minoritised background dropped by half to 7%, compared to 14% in 2022, 9% in 2021, 8% in 2020, 5% in 2019, 4% in 2018 and 1% in 2017.

The drop in the percentage of main characters from racially minoritised backgrounds we have observed in this report is the first in the history of this work. Whilst there was a sustained annual increase in the number of racially minoritised main characters in the first six reports, the rate of growth did not correlate to the rate of growth in overall presence. The increase in the former was slower which compromised the capacity to close this gap. In previous reports, we spent time interrogating the disparity in the rate of growth between these two data sets.

Whilst the drop is disconcerting and marks the lowest figure since the third report, we have noted interesting developments in terms of distinctive ethnic groups. We have observed incremental gains in the percentage of main characters identified as belonging to the broad ethnic categories defined in the English Census as Arab, Asian, Black, Chinese or Mixed Heritage. Whilst these terms are somewhat reductive and do not account for the mutable nature of individuals or the nuances of communities within communities, we use these categorisations as a means of helping us to draw parallels between the real world and the world of the page. The two ethnic categories that featured the highest proportion of presence were Asian and Black. The extent of growth varied quite significantly within each category. Main characters of Indian heritage were the largest growing ethnic group within the category of characters identified as Asian. Characters of Chinese heritage were the second highest and characters of Bangladeshi heritage formed the lowest number within this category. Main characters coded as Black were the largest growing ethnic group within the category of characters identified as Black. Characters coded as Black British came second, characters of Black African heritage came third and characters of Black African Caribbean heritage formed the lowest amount in this category after Black Other. It is both interesting and important to interrogate the extent of presence across and within the range of demographic groups, as this invites considerations such as, whose stories are we telling, what types of stories are we producing and how are these stories being told? These prompts should help to reduce the risk of flattening the characterisation of ethnic identities to homogeneous, generic shorthand

conveyed solely through colour palettes or stock descriptors. In previous reports, we have shared our observations of how representations within and across demographic groups can lack sufficient nuance, depth and substance. It is all the more important to take this into account given how low the percentage points of each sub-demographic group is in terms of the actual overall volume of output. Care must be exercised during the character development phases of book creation and consideration must continue to be invested in simultaneously growing the quantity, quality and range of portrayals.



Reflecting on Character Voice and Agency

The analysis framework we use to guide the review process has been designed to enable us to identify the ethnicity of each character and their position in the narrative. It also supports reviewers to assess whether these characters had the agency to express themselves over the course of the narrative and note whether or not their ethnicity was overly determined or incidental to the plot.

77% of racially minoritised characters featured in the sample of titles submitted influenced the narrative in their expression of thought, voice or action. This is an important figure to monitor because as we have maintained throughout this research series, presence alone is not enough. We must continue to assess how racially minoritised characters show up in literature, how they are portrayed and how they contribute to the narrative. Portrayals must be thoughtfully developed to allow readers to be treated to varied and multidimensional characterisations. Broadly speaking this will and should translate into stories in which the ethnicity of the character is incidental to the plot. However, at times the ethnicity of the character will necessarily be integral to the themes and narrative, particularly if the subject matter relates to historical

figures, moments or movements. In this cycle, we found that 16% of the titles reviewed featured a main character who spoke about their ethnicity and whose ethnicity formed the basis of a plot point. This figure continues to remain relatively static compared to the previous reports and aligns with the trend of publishing titles that focus on unpicking some of the themes arising from political discourse regarding identity, belonging, legacies of imperialism, Windrush and anti-racist activism. There is value in both incidental and explicit characterisations, as they are jointly crucial in normalising the presence of racially minoritised characters as part of the mainstream reading experience for all readers.

Cast Dynamics

The percentage drop in racially minoritised characters occupying main character roles in this reporting cycle compared to the last report did not necessarily coincide with a stark variation in the number of secondary or side-kick characters from a racially minoritised background. The decrease in the former did not mean an increase or significant change in the latter. The number of secondary and side-kick characters from a racially minoritised background was proportionate to the number of main characters. With that said, given the drop in the number of main characters from a racially minoritised background, careful consideration will need to be given to the impact on cast dynamics moving forward. We encourage publishers to not only remain attentive to the volume of racially minoritised characters but also be considered about their positioning in the narrative. We are keen that the gains made in the first six years of this study are not compromised by this drop. We will continue to assess the make up of casts and give consideration to how racially minoritised characters are located in both the main cast compositions and in the background of texts.

Multicultural Cast of Characters with Shared Agency

The alternative to the main cast format is what we have continued to define as a 'multicultural cast of characters' in which equal weighting is given to an entire cast of characters in terms of presence, agency and voice. This type of casting format is one that can be encountered in children's literature particularly in picturebooks for early readers or in biography anthology titles.

The prominence of such a composition can vary. 16% of books submitted for this year's review featured a multicultural cast of characters with shared agency. This is much lower than the last report. However, although this figure corresponded to the wider drop in racially minoritised characters, it felt more indicative of a shift in casting formats and text types featured in the submissions.

Background Characters Identified as Belonging to an Ethnic Minority Category

32% of the submitted titles reviewed only featured the presence of racially minoritised characters in the form of background characters. This marks an increase from the 25% reported in the last cycle. The normalisation of backgrounds featuring a diverse range of characters is an important contribution towards ensuring more inclusive and representative literature. However given the drop in representations of main characters, it will be crucial to carefully monitor the way in which the pattern of these two key statistics evolve moving forward. Increased presence of racially minoritised characters in the background with a parallel drop in racially minoritised main characters could lead to a regression in which racially minoritised characters are relegated to tokenistic wallpaper as opposed to meaningful presence. This would be deeply disappointing given the significant gains reported in the first six years of this study.



2023 Survey Findings and Insights

Reflecting on Content

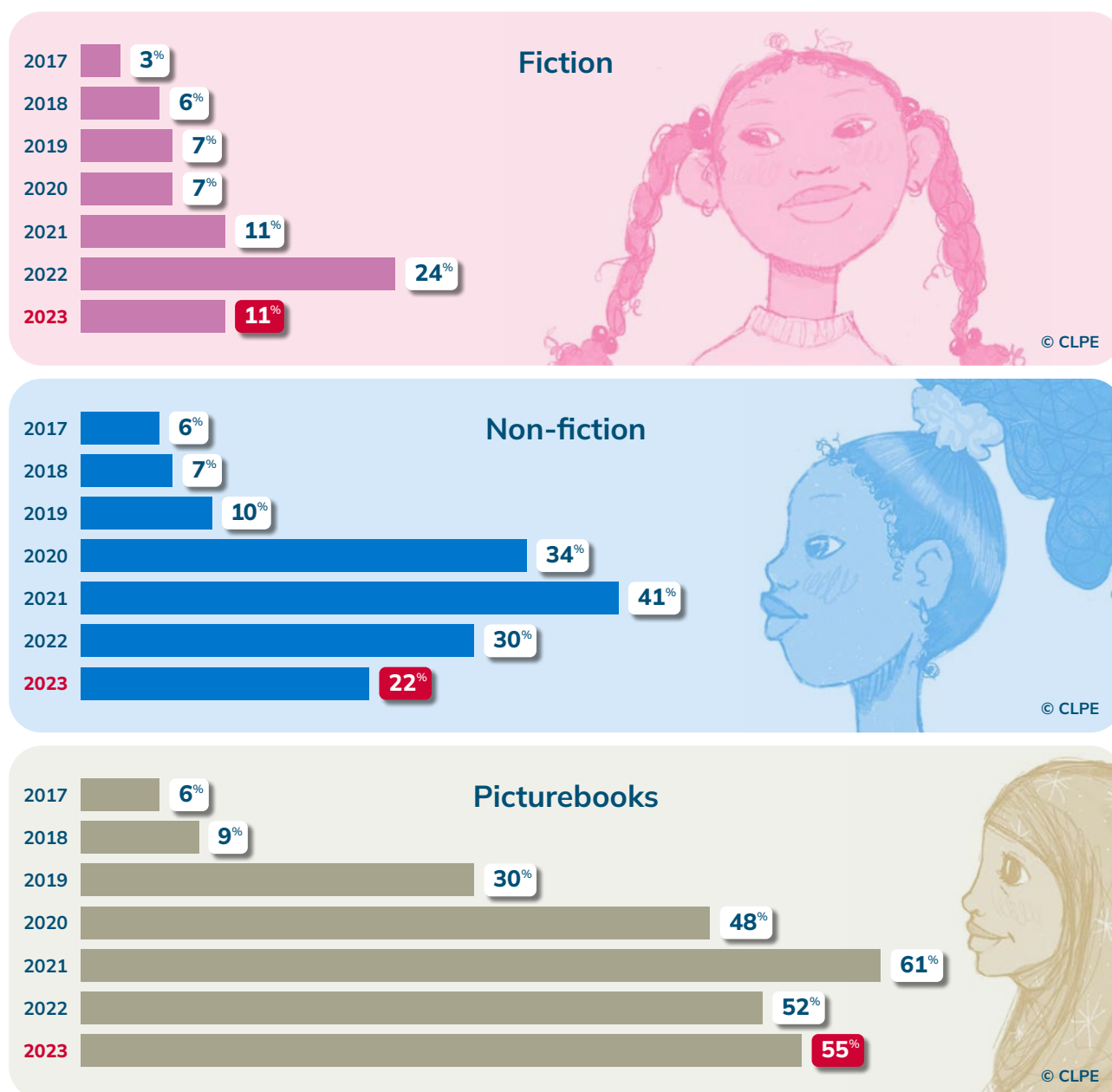


In the last report, we reflected on the consistent year on year increase in the percentage of racially minoritised characters featured in commercial children's literature between 2017 and 2022. We commented that this was a positive indicator of raised awareness within the publishing industry regarding the importance of ensuring inclusivity. We recognised that this heightened consciousness had manifested in increased inclusive output. However, we emphasised that the quality of presence was varied and ranged from poorly executed portrayals to surface level representations to

exceptional characterisations. We encouraged publishers to channel this heightened consciousness towards ensuring consistency of meaningful presence conveyed through thoughtful, high quality representations.

We reiterate this message here because if meaningful presence is the driving force it will help alleviate complacency and ensure that readers are able to access quality representative literature that centres memorable, richly drawn characters.

Percentage of UK Children's Fiction, Non-fiction and Picturebooks featuring Racially Minoritised Characters over the last Seven Years (FIG. 3)



Extent of Representation of Racially Minoritised Groups in Books According to Text Type

Picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction form the foundation of the literary diet within the average classroom and this is why these are the three text types we choose to review for the purposes of this study. Each of these text types offers a unique value to the reading experiences of children. There will be general reasons why under-representation is problematic that will be applicable across all three types of literature but there will also be implications that are unique to each type of text.

As with previous cycles we invited publishers to submit fiction, non-fiction and picturebooks featuring racially minoritised characters aimed at readers within the 3-11 age range. The rate of growth of presence in picturebooks has far exceeded the other two text types over the course of this research series, growing from 6% in the first year and reaching its peak of 61% in the fifth report. Last year we noted the first ever drop in this category from 61% to 52%.

This year we are pleased to report an increase of 3%. Whilst this doesn't take us back to peak levels, it does at least show movement back in the right direction.

For the first time in the history of this research we observed a drop in the percentage of fiction titles from 24% in the last report to 11%. This is disheartening as this is the text type that has seen the slowest growth over the first six years compared to the other two text types. We had commented previously that since the third report, the rate of growth in the presence of racially minoritised characters in fiction compared to the other two text types was markedly slower, with the gap between the different text types significantly widening over time. This further drop is likely to compromise any gains that have been made.

There was also a drop in presence in non-fiction from 30% in the last report to 22%. This marks the second drop in a row following a sustained increase in the first five reports. The first five years in which we reported consistent growth in presence in non-fiction paralleled significant national and international events. These included but were not limited to the 70th Anniversary of Partition, the Windrush Scandal, the global response to George Floyd's murder led by the Black Lives Matter Movement and the Refugee crisis. We speculated in previous reports that the socio-political backdrop and the corresponding heightened national discourse pertaining to identity, belonging, migration, racism and Britishness may have had an influencing factor on publishing output. Non-fiction provides a useful channel through which to recognise and reckon with these deeply painful and traumatic injustices and legacies. To observe a drop two years in a row would indicate a shift in focus. In the latest set of submissions, the highest sub-category of non-fiction comprised titles focusing on STEM related subject matter, which saw a marked increase compared to the last report. Conversely we saw a small drop in biography titles. This could be a coincidence, however when combined with the broader decreases in representative output it could suggest that the industry's attentions are moving towards other areas either because they feel these areas warrant attention or because they are moving away from developing representative texts.

Regardless of the motivation, conscious or otherwise, there should be no reason for inclusion to be compromised, as representation should be a feature of any sub-genre within this and all text types.



Quality of Presence in Picturebooks

Picturebooks continue to have the highest proportion of presence across the three text types. Despite reporting a drop of 9 percentage points in the last report we are able to report that in this cycle we have seen a slight increase on last year with 55% of picturebook titles published in 2023 featuring characters from racially minoritised backgrounds within their casts. Whilst this is an increase compared to the last report, the figure does not match or exceed the heights achieved in the fifth report. As in previous reports the quality in terms of intentionality and attention to detail when developing racially minoritised characters remains varied. Poorer representations tend to be rooted in surface level portrayals that feel under-developed and bear some of the hallmarks of the degrees of erasure introduced in our [second report](#). However, we continue to see rich and nuanced portrayals in this text type that shift the bar by exemplifying the scope of what can be possible.

What my Daddy Loves by Raissa Figueroa and published by HarperCollins is a beautiful celebration of fatherhood. Each spread invites the reader to share in tender and intimate moments of bonding, joy, curiosity, growth, love and creativity. The varied cast of Black fathers enjoying and embracing these moments with their children allows readers to appreciate the many facets of fatherhood.

Is that your Mama? written by Patrice Lawrence and illustrated by Diane Ewen and published by Scholastic offers a unique direct exploration of mixed heritage

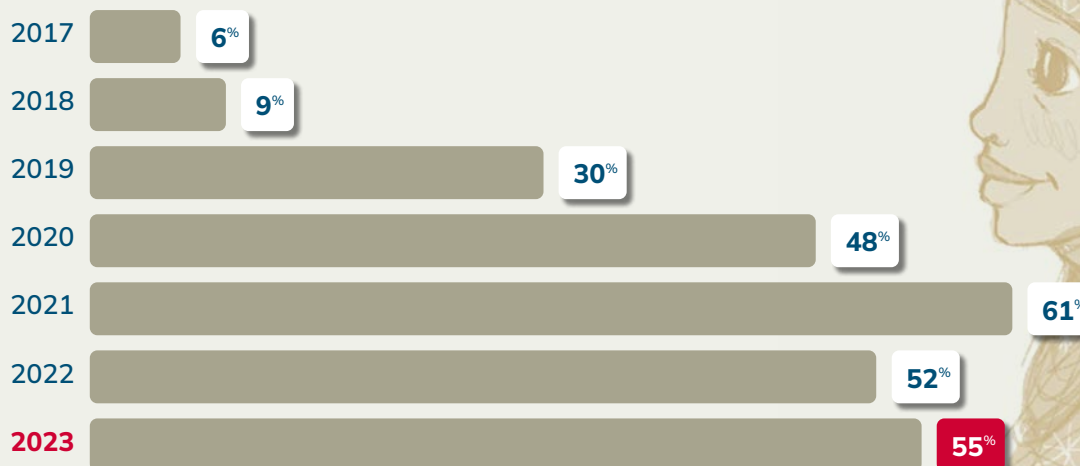
families that goes beyond the more didactic style that books on this theme can take. It is affirming, authentic and honest in its exploration and resolution. The narrative leads by example by uplifting its protagonist and allowing her to answer only to herself.

Listening to the Quiet by Cassie Silva and illustrated by Frances Ives and published by Lantana sensitively shares a very personal, heartfelt and authentic story. The main character's mother experiences gradual hearing loss over time and the story centres on how the mother and daughter respond to the changes that arise as a consequence. This is a good example of the intersections of identity that we embody and the importance of having stories that convey this.

BIG written by Vashti Harrison and published by Penguin Random House is a poignant story that lays the roadmap to a child's journey towards self-love and highlights the power of words to both hurt and heal. It is a truly breath taking masterclass in the power of an affirming, honest and vulnerable story. Harrison's work is always infused with such sensitivity, thoughtfulness, heart and power.

One of the great gains of the last seven years is the 'emergence' of such strong and exciting talent in this space. We use the word 'emergence,' tentatively because creatives of colour didn't just start existing in this seven-year window. Whilst they have always existed, the opportunity to showcase their talent has not.

Percentage of Picturebooks Featuring Racially Minoritised Characters (FIG. 4)



The opportunities have been few and far between and the scope for a sustainable career within the publishing industry is always challenging. The gains of recent years have gifted young readers a range of tremendous talent from new and longstanding illustrators including but not limited to Allen Fatimaharan, Chanté Timothy, Dapo Adeola, Diane Ewen, Holly Sterling, Joelle Avelino, Ken Wilson-Max, Lucy Farfort, Nadia Shireen, Onyinye Iwu,

Selom Sunu, Soofiya, Yijing Li and the many more detailed in this and previous reports. Each illustrator adds to the growing richness and variation of representations and stories available to young readers. To revert to the limitations that preceded this last decade would be incomprehensible. We hope that the shift will at the very least sustain this more recent baseline and that the industry maintains this by investing in this body of talent.

Quality of Presence in Fiction

The analysis framework that guides the review process has a number of features factored into its design. One of these is to capture the genres of fiction submitted. This has allowed us to observe which genres have featured racially minoritised characters each year. It has also enabled us to monitor how this has evolved in terms of extent of presence and variation in the breadth of genres. In the last report we noted a distinctive richness in the genres and themes across the titles we reviewed. This enabled us to create categories of realities to describe the rich breadth of characterisations and story worlds featured in the submissions. As with the last report we enjoyed a range of genres, with the proportion of Adventure titles remaining equivalent to the proportion observed in the last set of submissions. We noted a very slight drop in the number of Comedy titles and a continued increase in the presence of Mystery and Fantasy titles, the latter of which made up the highest proportion of fiction titles. This variation of genres is important particularly given the overall decrease in this text type.

Historical fiction that centres racially minoritised characters has enjoyed a level of prominence in recent years. It is a welcome trend because such titles offer opportunities to counteract erasure and misrepresentation. They serve as a form of reclamation and provide important insights into the past and how it has shaped our present. Catherine Johnson has long led the charge in this area. And over the course of our seven year monitoring period publishers such as Scholastic and Barrington Stoke have produced important titles and series that contribute to broader and more balanced and inclusive perspectives regarding different historical eras. Such titles have allowed young readers to be

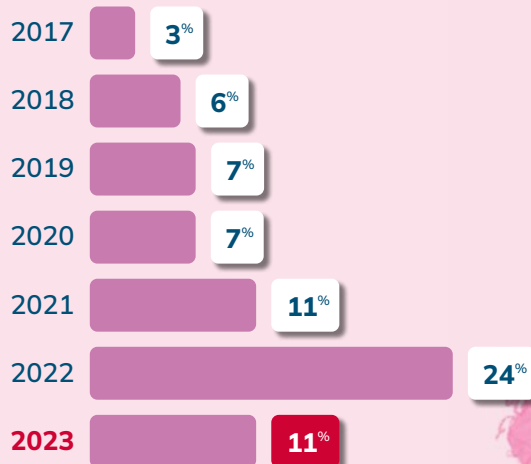
treated to the storytelling prowess of long established writers such as Bali Rai, Alex Wheatle and the late Benjamin Zephaniah, as well as, gifting us with newer voices of the last decade such as Sufiya Ahmed, Kereen Getten, Patrice Lawrence, Hiba Noor Khan, E.L. Norry, Richard O'Neill and Leila Rasheed.

We hope that these stories continue to be explored, developed and shared, as the possibilities in this genre alone are infinite. In addition to offering readers re-examinations of the past they also appear to have sown the seeds for the emergence of genre defying texts that centre racially minoritised characters such as titles like SF Said's *Tyger* that we discussed in the last report. This exceptional contemporary classic combined history, theology, mythology, mystery adventure, thriller, philosophy and much more to craft a gripping, moving, inspiring, existential, timely and powerful story. In this reporting cycle, we were delighted to be able to enjoy more titles produced in this vein. J.T. Williams' *Lizzie and Belle: Portraits and Poison* illustrated by Simone Douglas and published by Farshore like *Tyger* was a literary feat. Art, literature, history and politics are articulated through storytelling and these stories shape cultures and the way we see ourselves and each other. *Portraits and Poison* provides a thoughtful and very powerful exploration of the way in which stories have been framed to the severe detriment of the lived experiences of marginalised, particularly in this instance, Black British, individuals and communities. It showcases the power of resistance and actively counteracts erasure across artistic, cultural and political spheres. It challenges misrepresentations and offers hope, whilst encased in a brilliantly crafted, engaging and accessible story.

Nazneen Ahmed Pathak's *City of Stolen Magic* illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat and published by Penguin Random House is another such exceptional title. Colonial era based narratives within children's literature have traditionally been told from the perspective of the



Percentage of Fiction Titles Featuring Racially Minoritised Characters (FIG. 5)



© CLPE

dominant power. Pathak flips this dynamic by rooting the story in the perspective of brave young Chompa and she does so whilst effortlessly weaving history, politics, imperialism, culture, religion and mythology with themes of separation, loss, longing, exploitation and resistance.

The hearts of these writers pulsate through every word. These titles move the dial because by drawing on the broader genre palette they are able to paint vivid, thought provoking, defiant and life changing stories. The power of such stories cannot be overstated because it takes exceptional skill and bravery to shape a narrative that challenges readers and society at large to evaluate what has been and what could be. It requires them to be bold in confronting violence, injustice, inhumanity, prejudice, racism and the legacies of imperialism. It requires them to be skilled in challenging thinking by guiding readers

through dilemmas and pivotal moments. And it illustrates their capacity to be creative enough to develop compelling characters and immerse readers in rich story worlds.

Whilst the drop in volume is discouraging we have been invigorated by the possibility that the richness of such titles can offer. To have gone from grappling to find any presence in genres like adventure, mystery and fantasy in the first year of this work to be now enjoying books that centre racially minoritised characters in all of these areas is wonderful. To see how this has manifested in the evolution of new iterations and creative amalgamations of these genres is a significant testament to the power of imagination and the world of possibilities that nurturing this can achieve. These writers and their stories are not only important additions to the shelf but they elevate the quality mark of children's literature.



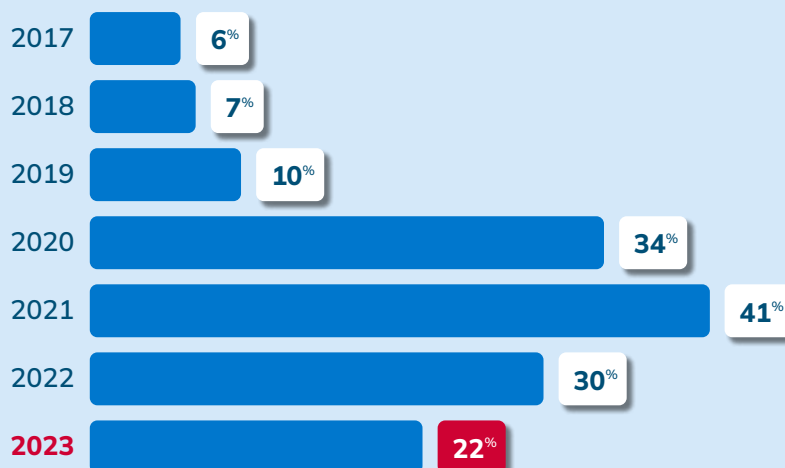
Quality of Presence in Non-fiction

The drop in the presence in non-fiction raises particular concerns given the invaluable contributions that this text type has to offer in terms of educating, raising awareness and challenging thinking. Articulating and exploring abstract theories, ideological concepts, political principles and historical moments for a young reader in a way that is accessible and engaging without striking a patronising tone or skimming over the substance is an immensely challenging undertaking. Given the state of the geo-political context it is paramount that books offer children with the information and tools of criticality to navigate ever increasing hostile landscapes bombarded with misinformation. In the last report we commented on some of the sophisticated innovations we were encountering in this text type that attempted to counteract and reframe realities in powerful and creative ways.

In this the seventh cycle, the review team had the opportunity to read titles that continued in this spirit such as Sathnam Sanghera's *Stolen History* illustrated by Jen Khatun and published by Penguin Random House and Shelina Janmohamed's *Story of Now: Let's Talk About the British Empire*, illustrated by Laura Greenan and published by Welbeck. Both of these titles offer important contributions to the body of literature that explores legacies of colonialism in accessible, reflective and engaging ways.



Percentage of Non-Fiction Titles Featuring Racially Minoritised Characters (FIG. 6)



Carefully considered, thoughtfully researched and beautifully produced titles such as Atinuke's *Brilliant Black British History* illustrated by Kingsley Nebechi published by Bloomsbury and *Bright Stars of Black British History* written by J.T. Williams, illustrated by Angela Vives and published by Thames and Hudson were welcome additions. They serve as key examples of non-fiction titles focused on counteracting erasure and reframing narratives to form more authentic, respectful and honest accounts, ensuring integrity to the subjects.

Adam Rutherford's *Where Are You Really From?* written with Emma Norry and illustrated by Adam Ming, published by Hachette also provides a key addition to titles that challenge thinking and build knowledge in relation to discourse on race and racism. The title takes a scientific approach and adds necessary nuance and depth that complements the range of titles referenced in previous reports as well as those detailed here.

Naomi Evans and Natalie Evans *Everyday Action, Everyday Change*, illustrated by Kelly Malka and published by Hachette is a further addition that not only explores and challenges racism but expands this to unpack other forms of prejudice and discrimination. Our review team commented that it stood out for its thoughtful exploration and dismantling of stereotypes, ensuring a meaningful and educational experience.

The strength of these titles and their value cannot be overstated. The world is likely to become a more challenging place before and if ever it becomes better and in the face of such adversity books and non-fiction in particular provide an important means of guiding us through. Young readers deserve titles that support them in making sense of themselves and the world around them. They need books that ignite and sustain their curiosity by encouraging them to question and explore everything.





Reflections and Recommendations

Reflections

Reflections on the Importance of Community

Community serves many functions and in the context of the publishing industry, it is crucial to the career viability and longevity of creatives. The support network provides an invaluable lifeline. The signposting and introductions can help create career changing connections. The championing of creatives can help sustain the stamina and resilience required to develop a career and navigate a space that can feel particularly precarious for creatives of colour. Awareness raising and advocacy is inherent in the work of fostering community. This advocacy work requires an additional layer of labour that is often selflessly taken on by many creatives.

In previous reports we have described this research series as sitting within a wider ecosystem. One that is formed of advocates from across disciplines and walks of life. They are all connected though a common goal of wanting young readers to access quality inclusive, representative literature. These advocates past and present undertake the range of activity detailed in this section in the spirit of seeking to make tangible changes in this area. As with previous reports, we have taken the time to signpost just some examples to highlight the interconnected ways in which agents of change have worked together as part of this community to achieve this common goal.

Collaborating

A number of writers and illustrators have taken on the mantle and work tirelessly to champion and create opportunities for fellow creatives. This comes in many forms with some of the examples detailed here. Award winning writer and illustrator Dapo Adeola embodies the essence of community in all that he does. He has fast become prolific producing well-loved characters and contemporary classic titles. In between managing this workload he makes time for fellow illustrators and creates platforms to showcase their work. Two such examples are the publication of anthology titles *Hey You!: An empowering celebration of growing up Black* conceptualised and compiled by Adeola and *Joyful, Joyful: Stories Celebrating Black Voices* edited by Adeola.

Award winning writer and illustrator Ken Wilson-Max has been a longstanding pillar of support within the writing community. His work as a writer, illustrator and publisher has always been driven by the aspiration of ensuring access to quality inclusive representative literature for all. In 2021 Wilson-Max joined forces with HarperCollins to work with the team to build a new list that aims to showcase the rich wealth of talent available.



Mentoring

We have seen the establishment of invaluable mentorship programmes that provide crucial guidance and support that create pathways into the industry. One such example is Megaphone Writers CIC founded by author Leila Rasheed in 2015. They provide subsidised and fully-funded development, mentoring and workshops for people of colour in England who want to write for children and teenagers. In 2019 Storymix was founded by entrepreneur, editor, screenwriter and author

Jasmine Richards. It is an organisation that provides invaluable opportunities to creatives through a unique and supportive mentoring model designed to create a pathway into the industry by incubating talent to produce literature for young readers. The Jericho Prize for Children's Writing was set up by educator Fabia Turner in 2021 to support emerging, unpublished and self-published Black-British children's writers.

Showcasing

We have also seen the emergence of new literary festivals created to celebrate and showcase the rich talent within and across communities. They also serve as important forums to recognise the value that representative literature adds to the literary space. The **Black British Book Festival** founded by Selina Brown in 2021 has fast become Europe's largest annual celebration of Black literature. 2023 marked the first **East and South East Asian Author (ESEA) festival**. This was organised by authors and illustrators of East and Southeast Asian heritage who met through The Bubble Tea Writer's Network,

founded by children's book author, Maisie Chan. 2024 saw the inaugural launch of **SAIL Fest**, a celebration of the best in South Asian children's illustration and literature founded by Sanchita Basu De Sarkar, Chitra Soundar and Sinéad Gosai. These are just some of the ways in which creatives with the support of educators, librarians and booksellers have rallied together to support the advancement in this area.

Celebrating

In the literary award space, we have seen the expansion of the **Jhalak Prize**. This is a prize that was launched in 2017, the very same year upon which the data for the first Reflecting Realities report was based. The prize was established to celebrate books by writers of colour in the UK and Ireland. In 2020, the single award was bifurcated to create a dedicated Jhalak Children's & YA Prize. Professor Singh and the Jhalak team have worked tirelessly to use the prize as a platform to showcase the immense quality being produced by writers of colour. The addition of a children's literature category in recent years has been very welcome and serves as a means of exemplifying the rich variation of stories and storytelling available and the infinite possibilities that this can offer readers.

Literary awards have the potential to spotlight new talent but also give much needed exposure to creatives who have been working in the space for some time. This is evident in the experience of author Zanib Mian who won the Little Rebel Awards in 2018. **The Little Rebels Children's Book Award** is a prize for radical fiction aimed at children aged 0-12. The award is given by the Alliance of Radical Booksellers and was established in conjunction with Letterbox Library. Mian was a self-published writer at the time and the win contributed towards her securing a contract with Hachette and going on



to publish five titles in the Planet Omar series. A middle grade series that has made an important contribution to the comedy genre in this space.

In 2019 **CILIP**, the UK Library and Information Association appointed Jake Hope to serve as Chair of the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway (CKG) Awards Working Party. This work was important in reviewing inclusive practices and evaluating the mechanisms, criteria and approaches to determining literary merit. In the same year the **Diverse Book Awards** was founded by award winning children's and YA author Abiola Bello and award winning publicist Helen Lewis. It strives to recognise and celebrate quality literature that centres diversity in all its forms – including but not limited to class, race, gender identity, sexuality, disability and other protected characteristics.

Inclusive Books for Children (IBC) are a new addition in the space and hosted their inaugural award for inclusive children's literature in 2024. The award recognises quality inclusive titles across three age categories and offers a generous cash prize for winning creatives. Awards are important not only to help increase visibility of talent operating in the space but also as a means of exemplifying literary quality.

Researching

At CLPE, we have recently completed a three-year longitudinal study funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation assessing the impact of access to ethnically representative literature on children's reading and writing identities. The early insights from this work have been shared in one of our newest publications titled *Representation in Children's Literature: Reflecting Realities in the Classroom* published by Sage.

In the scholarly space we have been treated to the rich critical perspectives shared in the regular *Books for Keeps, Beyond the Secret Garden* column which will culminate in the publication of a new book written by the authors and esteemed members of the Reflecting Realities Steering group, Dr Darren Chetty and Professor Karen Sands O'Connor. The book is titled *Beyond the Secret Garden Children's Literature and Representations of Black and Racially minoritised People* and is published by our sister organisation the *English & Media Centre*.

A further crucial contribution to thinking in this space has been the robust and considered work of another valued member of the Reflecting Realities steering group, Professor Melanie Ramdarshan Bold. The research that she conducted for BookTrust England – *BookTrust Represents: Research into representation of people of colour among children's book authors and illustrators* has made evident the significant barriers and challenges for creatives of colour in navigating the publishing industry and sustaining a career.

We have seen the importance of drawing connections between the use of literature within schools and how crucial it is to evaluate and evolve the reading diets that form the basis of the Secondary English Programmes of Study. Key insights in this area have been articulated through the *Penguin Random House Lit in Colour* initiative, which has been exceptionally steered by another key member of the Reflecting Realities Steering Group, Dr Zaahida Nabagereka.

This work has been developed parallel to a growing body of UK based scholarly work offering multi-disciplinary perspectives on anti-racist pedagogies from key contributors including but not limited to the important works of Professor Kehinde Andrews, Professor Kalwant Bhopal, Dr Ian Cushing, Professor David Gillborn, Professor Vini Lander, Professor Nicola Rollock and Dr Wayne Tennent.

The Reflecting Realities research has been produced within the context of this thoughtful, innovative, generous and galvanising community activity. All of these strands of activity, knowledge generation, advocacy and amazing range of creatives operating in the space both new and well established combined with the learning from the Reflecting Realities surveys mean that there is ample material available to make clear what good quality representative and inclusive literature can look like and why it's important.



Reflections on taking this Learning Forward

The gains of recent years are the result of a collective effort on all sides, as evident from the examples cited in the previous section. This research contributes to advocacy in this area which forms part of a broader timeline that spans many decades. The recent ground swell of heightened advocacy has to a large extent been a direct response to the socio-economic and political context of the last decade.

The primary function of the Reflecting Realities reports is to provide quantitative and qualitative data to track how racially minoritised characters are represented and the extent to which this is the case. It has been our hope throughout that this data serves to inspire change for the better. Every report in this series has provided an annual snapshot of industry output. With each report we have developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for how inclusion and representation can manifest in literature, adding to the rich scholarly work of many advocates past and present, as well as the crucial work of care givers, teachers, librarians, award bodies, booksellers, publishers and creatives. The backdrop against which this research has been undertaken will no doubt have impacted the consistent upward trajectory in the first six years. It is a socio-political context that has impressed a necessary urgency to challenging prejudice, racism and discrimination. Books offer a perfect space to hold mirrors to the world and grapple with the reflections. It is difficult to determine why there has been such a marked decline in the figures detailed in this year's report when the matter of representation has been such a prevalent part of industry discourse in recent years as inspired by the breadth of community activity commented upon.

For the purposes of this study, we can only speak with certainty about the content we review. We do not evaluate the environment in which they are produced. We do not determine how writers and illustrators are supported through the creative process. We do not assess the amount of investment made to promote the titles to ensure that they get into the hands of readers. This context matters and will have a bearing on the sustainability of careers and representative output in this field. The parameters of this study are confined to the content of output and not the systems and infrastructure that facilitate the publication of this output. For more insights in this regard we would encourage readers to refer to the BookTrust Represents research referenced in the previous section.

We can only speculate as to why the drop has occurred and why now after seven years. The sharp decrease combined with sustained low levels of representations of sub-demographic groups could suggest that we are seeing the result of possible complacency that we have warned against in previous reports. As expressed at the outset of this report, historic patterns would suggest that responses to advocacy in this area are cyclical in their nature and with every period of advancement an inevitable dip is likely to follow, reducing increased presence to a trend as opposed to an embedded standard.

The content of titles produced during this period of monitoring offer interesting potential indicators as to why representation has grown over time and dropped so sharply in this seventh year. There are many variables that influence what ends up on book shelves. There is however undoubtedly an inter-relationship between story worlds and the real world, in which one feeds the other in a reciprocal loop.

Writing serves as a means of making sense of ourselves, those around us, the world and our relationship to it. It provides space to work through what we think and how we feel. And creates the opportunity to express ourselves and communicate with others. Over the last seven years there has been much to grapple with and writing has been an important means of processing and articulating the challenges of our times. Writing as a creative and reflective practice allows for literature to spotlight and respond to the issues of the day, anticipate tomorrow and suggest ways of being and moving forward. Writers therefore respond to and help to evolve and shape culture.



If we chart the growth of representative titles against key moments, a pattern emerges which illustrates this in practice. The combination of Brexit, the Refugee crisis, the Black Lives Matter movement, rise in far right movements and austerity are just some of the factors that have contributed to a reckoning with what it means to belong and have your humanity recognised. The often polarising and heightened nature of this discourse creates a perfect space for literature to disrupt and engage with the problematic narratives that such discourse inspires. Given the volatility of this period it makes sense that this would correspond to such a sharp and consistent increase in output.

Whilst this conveys the power of literature to respond to, inform and evolve discourse, it also highlights that in matters of representation there is a danger that representative and inclusive titles are only deemed shelf-worthy in this context as a means of response, rather than having inherent value regardless of the context. Representative books should not be viewed as a text 'type.' If they are only ever seen as a text type, then their production will rely on the whim of trends determined by patterns in socio-political discourse. For example, a spike in books affirming Black identities and activism following a heinous murder or miscarriage of justice will not be sustained when the news feeds inevitably move on.

The drop in this year's report could be indicative of an assumption that the gains in the early phase of this research have been sufficient in making the difference. But the difference can only really mean anything if it is maintained and embedded.

The drop could also be the consequence of the distance from the tragedy of the summer of 2020. We reported the highest overall increase in the sixth year. The seeds of these books will have been sown soon after and in response to the murder of George Floyd. Although society has continued to battle with racist injustices both nationally and internationally none have arguably galvanised the level of global institutional introspection to quite the same degree as inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement.

The gains combined with a shift in the zeitgeist can lead to the assumption that the work is done. However, a man should not have to be killed to trigger an evaluation of practices. And Black people should not have to keep being killed to keep institutions accountable in matters relating to inclusion.

Racially minoritised people do not start and stop being so in accordance with societal milestones or in response to tragedy. The humanity, personalities, cultures and individuality of people and communities should not be framed through such a narrow lens. Representation and inclusion should thread through the body of books because books should reflect realities and the reality is that there is a world of stories waiting to be told.

We need representative literature to be a permanent, integrated feature of industry output and not solely as a vehicle to recognise anniversaries or in response to significant events. Representative and inclusive literature has the power to help inspire hearts, challenge thinking and shape culture. This is why the industry cannot afford to take its foot off the gas and risk undermining the tremendous gains it has made in this area. We should view this drop as an opportunity to recalibrate. It should serve as a reminder that the work of ensuring inclusive literature is available for all is only just really getting started. There is a growing body of insight through these reports, wider advocacy and the examples of well received inclusive titles to be clear about what good representative literature can look like. The next phase must involve continued introspection to support the evaluation of staffing, resourcing, practices, systems and investment to maintain the gains made during this window of time. The findings shared in this year's report will no doubt be sobering but we do not have the luxury of time to dwell in a disheartened state. Complacency can breed inaction and disappointment can cause us to stall. The gains made during the first six years of this work are too significant to risk a roll back.



Reflections and Recommendations

Recommendations



The Reflecting Realities reports can only serve as a catalyst for change if they are used to inform action with tangible outcomes. Collating, reporting and sharing these findings each year with publishers, teachers and wider stakeholders is only the first part of a much wider chain of actions necessary to effect change in this space.

In previous reports we have provided detailed recommendations to support the development of quality ethnically inclusive and representative literature. These continue to remain valid and applicable and we would encourage anyone interested in furthering the aims of this work to take all previous guidance into consideration along with the wider signposting referenced in this report. In this year's report we have three simple recommendations:

1. Recognise that inclusive literature can simultaneously be responsive to social injustice whilst not being solely defined by this.

Inclusion can be a central component of a text whilst not being its defining feature. If inclusive literature is solely regarded as a type of text designed to explore either suffering, subjugation, struggle or success, it will only be deemed necessary and appropriate for exclusive purposes such as, for specific audiences or to mark or respond to particular events. Whereas if efforts are made to ensure that the content of the literature we consume is inclusive as a basic standard requirement then it will forever be the case regardless of what happens to be going in the world beyond the book shelf.

The range of types of realities being conveyed in the literature we have encountered through this work as categorised in the [sixth report](#) in the series highlight the breadth of story worlds that an inclusive approach can create access to.

2. Make the principle of inclusion integral to every stage of the publishing process.

Take time to consider the following key questions:

- How can we be more inclusive to help alleviate barriers to access and pathways into the industry?
- How do we ensure that our practices in cultivating talent are inclusive?
- How do we ensure consistency in our application of professional rigour and critical reflection when working with creatives of colour to develop concepts?
- How do we consistently work closely with creatives of colour to develop an authentic publication that is true to their vision and executed to the highest quality?
- How do we ensure equitable distribution of investment in supporting and promoting the works of all creatives to ensure that their books reach as wide an audience as possible and stand the best possible chance of succeeding in the market place?
- How do we remain mindful that our work in promoting (new) writers of colour relates to the larger project of addressing historical racism and exclusion in children's literature?

3. Understand the value and remain committed to the principle of inclusion.

The ethical imperative should go without saying. But beyond this the principle of inclusion simply makes books better. Through every review process of the last seven years we have had the privilege of being treated to stories, characters, writing and worlds that have elevated the literary landscape, enriched the culture and transformed reading experiences. This can only be a good thing for the publishing industry and with the appropriate investment can have positive commercial and reputational implications. We encourage the industry to take the lessons learned and remain steadfast in their commitment to reflecting realities and serving their readership.



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Steering Committee

This work was led by Farrah Serroukh from CLPE in consultation with a Steering Committee of leading experts in publishing and education who included:

- **Dr Darren Chetty**
Lecturer, University College London
- **Dr Fen Coles**
Co-director, Letterbox Library
- **Louise Johns-Shepherd**
Chief Executive The Kids Network
- **Professor Vini Lander**
Director of the Centre for Race, Education and Decoloniality Carnegie School of Education Leeds Beckett University
- **Nicky Parker**
Literature and Human Rights Specialist, Amnesty International
- **Professor Melanie Ramdarshan Bold**
Professor of Youth Literature and Culture – Culture, Literacies, Inclusion & Pedagogy, University of Glasgow
- **Professor Karen Sands O'Connor**
Visiting Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield
- **Dr Zaahida Nabagereka**
Senior Social Impact Manager (Lit in Colour) and Co-Founder of @afrikult

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The goodwill and continued participation of the UK Children's Publishing industry demonstrates a genuine commitment to better representation in children's literature. Thank you for your engagement with this initiative and we look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you on this collective enterprise.

"The importance of children seeing a variety of perspectives, ethnicities and backgrounds in books cannot be overstated. If we don't create enough nuanced and authentic representations of characters of colour detailing a range of experiences and perspectives, we risk crystallising the dangerous and already potent idea that the realm of books and storytelling are for a select few, and always will be."

Dr Zaahida Nabagereka





"We are proud to continue to fund CLPE's Reflecting Realities report which is a vital annual touchpoint for children's publishers and the wider ecosystem. As a society we owe it to children to ensure that the books they find in their schools, libraries and bookshops are representative of their lived experiences, especially in the face of recent evidence of an alarming decline in reading enjoyment among young people.

Relevant and representative books are a fundamental building block in getting children back into reading for pleasure. We are committed to advocating – with CLPE and many other partners and stakeholders – for sustained change in diverse representation so that recent gains won't be lost."

James Urquhart, Interim Director Literature, Arts Council England





If you have any questions about this report please contact CLPE:


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