

Let's think about... Books, Belonging & Representation

A 1-2 hours staff meeting template to use with your team.

Objective:

To deepen staff understanding of the role books play in promoting equality, diversity & inclusion. And to explore how to ensure your setting is using quality, engaging and meaningfully inclusive texts.

Rationale:

Books are often viewed as a simple way of promoting equality, diversity and inclusion. Books can support children's sense of identity and belonging whilst also broadening their understanding of the world and the people around them.

This session invites teams to reflect on the messages that books in their setting communicate and how book provision can be shaped in ways that are meaningful, engaging and authentic for children.

Activity 1 (10 minutes)

What Are Books For?

Books can support many different aspects of children's development and learning. However, the reasons we value books may influence the books we choose and how we use them.

Working in small groups, rank the following purposes of books in order of importance.

- Language development
- Supporting communication
- Supporting a sense of belonging
- Representation
- Developing empathy
- Imagination and creativity
- Learning about the world
- Enjoyment and pleasure

Discussion prompts

- How did the rankings compare across different groups?
- Does your ranking reflect how books are currently used within your setting?
- Where did belonging and representation appear in your ranking and why?

Facilitator Reflection:

Books can serve many purposes within early years practice. They can support communication and language, spark imagination, encourage empathy, provide enjoyment and help children learn about the world around them.

The ranking activity highlights that there is rarely a single "right" answer. Different settings, practitioners and children may place different value on these purposes.

Activity 2 (15 minutes)

Who Belongs Here?

Ask staff to visit the book areas within the rooms they work in and view the books through the lens of different children within their cohort.

You may wish to use examples such as:

- A child who doesn't live with their birth parents
- A child with two mums or two dads
- A child who speaks another language at home
- A child from the global majority
- A child with a disability
- A child living in temporary accommodation
- A child who lives with their mum, dad and siblings

Key Discussion: Would these children see themselves reflected?

Further Discussion prompts:

- What messages might children receive about who belongs?
- Whose experiences are most visible?
- Whose experiences are missing?

Share reflections as a whole group.

Facilitator Reflection

Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of books as "windows and mirrors" reminds us that books can offer children insight into the lives of others whilst also reflecting aspects of their own experiences.

Activity 3 (10 minutes)

Representation: More Than Matching Appearances

As a team, consider the following example:

Nia is four years old and lives in Bristol. Her parents were both born in the UK and her grandparents moved to Britain from Ghana.

After reviewing their book collection, practitioners notice that many of the books feature White characters. Keen to improve representation, they purchase several books set in African villages featuring wildlife and rural lifestyles.

The team feels pleased that children like Nia will now see themselves represented, but are surprised to observe that children rarely choose the books.

Reflect together

- In what ways might Nia see herself reflected in these books?
- In what ways might these books not reflect her experiences?
- What assumptions might practitioners be making?

"The danger of a single story is not that it is untrue, but that it is incomplete."
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Key Reflection:

What assumptions do we make about who a book represents?

Activity 4 (15 minutes)

Choosing Books That Matter

Reflect on the most popular books children choose and engage with.

Discussion prompts

- What makes these books most popular with children?
- Are all the books we choose developmentally appropriate for the children accessing them?
- Have we ever selected books because they represent an identity whilst overlooking whether they are engaging, accessible or meaningful for the children?

Share the following evidence for the team to consider

The Education Endowment Foundation highlights the importance of children's active participation during shared reading, noting that discussion and interaction can support language development.

This raises an important question:

If children rarely choose, engage with or revisit the books we are using to promote inclusion, what opportunities are there for those books to support language, belonging and connection?

Facilitator Reflection:

Representation and child engagement should work together rather than being seen as competing priorities.

A book cannot truly support belonging if children rarely choose it, engage with it or understand it. Representation matters, but representation alone is not enough. A book can contain diverse characters and still fail to engage the children it is intended to support.

Reflective Question

How do we balance representation with what we know about children's interests, developmental stage and experiences?

Activity 5 (10 minutes)

Commitment

Ask staff to spend a few minutes reflecting individually on the following question:

What is one small, achievable action that could strengthen children's sense of belonging through the books we share?

Invite each team member to share their commitment with the group.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Creating an inclusive book collection requires us to think carefully about whose experiences are visible, how identities are represented and whether children genuinely see themselves reflected in meaningful and authentic ways.

The goal is not to represent every child, every identity and every experience all at once. Instead, it is to create thoughtful, flexible book provision that evolves in response to the children, families and communities within your setting.

Follow-Up Prompts and Activities

- Carry out a full review of books in your setting.
- Observe which books children choose independently over the following month.
- Invite families to share and recommend books that are meaningful to them.
- Review how books are organised and accessed by different age groups.
- Explore whether any books are present but rarely shared and discuss why.
- Explore upcoming events in the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Network.
- Check out CLPE's reflecting realities report which explores ethnic representation in children's literature here: [CLPE Reflecting Realities - Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature \(November 2024\)](#) | [Centre for Literacy in Primary Education](#)

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