## Student Article

# Representations of Diversity in Classroom Resources: "Windows and Mirrors" or Cracked Glass?

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I am a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), recently graduated from Marino Institute of Education. My specific interest in intercultural education arose two years ago while studying the module as part of the Bachelor of Education course. My lecturer made reference to a quote from Carol Buehner (n.d.): "in years to come, children may not remember everything they learned in your classroom, but they will remember how they felt". This quote really resonated with me, and I became inspired to develop my own knowledge, skills, and confidence in order to effectively implement inclusive practice in my future teaching career. Following my teaching experience in two Community National Schools, my passion for diversity and inclusion increased further. My dissertation focussed on the representations of migration-related diversity in classroom resources, which has helped me in becoming competent and confident in teaching the increasing number of students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds now in Irish classrooms and provided me with a huge insight into the implications of teaching in these multicultural settings.

KEYWORDS: Primary Education, Diversity, Representation, Immigration, Resources

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades has seen major changes to Irish society. This is partly due to annual increases in inward migration (Forghani-Arani et al., 2019). Since schools in contemporary Ireland are a "microcosm of society" (Moloney & O'Toole, 2018, p. 55), classrooms have also become increasingly diverse, with children from a range of nationalities and ethnicities now present. This article uses documentary analysis to examine the representations of migration-related diversity in the resources used in Irish primary school classrooms. In particular, the researcher examines textbooks, children's literature, images and toys to establish whether all

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children can see accurate representations of their lives and the lives of others within classroom resources.

Immigrant students can be faced with a multitude of potential challenges that can result in marginalisation both in the classroom and society (Wilson, 2014). One way to acknowledge and recognise minority ethnic students is to include representations of them in the resources used in classrooms. Bishop (1990, p. iii) uses the metaphor "windows and mirrors" to describe how children can learn about themselves and others in literature. For the purpose of this article, this metaphor is extended to describe all resources. Resources should serve as 'windows', offering glimpses into other people's lives, as well as highlighting the difficult circumstances that others from around the world may endure. These windows should also act as 'mirrors', allowing individuals to see reflections of their own lives and experiences in the resources used in their classroom. Given the pivotal role that resources play in creating an inclusive classroom environment (Bishop, 1990), this research aims to examine if textbooks, books, images and toys exhibit balanced and varied depictions of various cultures and nationalities, which ensure all students can find their "mirrors" and learn about minority groups. This article highlights the key finding of a broader dissertation which examined this topic.

## CONTEXT

Although Ireland has never been a mono-cultural society, the country's ethnic profile has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Several studies have claimed that this is predominantly due to the significant increase in inward migration in recent years, with immigrants originating from a range of national, social, and ethnic backgrounds (McDaid, 2011; McGinnity & Kingston, 2017; Melia & Kerrigan, 2018; Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013). The number of people who immigrated to Ireland in the year leading up to the 2016 Census increased from 53,267 in 2011, to 82,346. Just over 28,100 were Irish, while 54,203 were non- Irish (CSO, 2017). Additionally, the report shows that there were 535,475 immigrants from 200 different countries resident in Ireland in 2016, accounting for 11.6 per cent of the total population (Melia & Kerrigan, 2018). Furthermore, in the past 15 years, immigrants of non-European background have entered Ireland in larger and more visible numbers (Melia & Kerrigan, 2018). Of the 11.6 per cent of immigrants in Ireland in 2016, 4.5 per cent were from countries outside of the EU (Central Statistic Office, 2017). Although Pinson (2014) claims that the number of people from racial and ethnic minorities living in Ireland is still relatively low when compared to other EU countries, Ryan (2015) argues that the change in Irish society is significant, nevertheless.

In the context of the population change discussed above, it is agreed that the ethnic and racial profile of many Irish schools has been significantly altered over the past number of years, as classrooms are now more diverse than ever before (Darmody et al., 2011; Devine, 2011; Ryan, 2015). In 2016, there was a total of 546, 916 pupils aged between 5 and 12 years enrolled in primary schools across Ireland (CSO, 2017). Table 1 shows the nationalities of these students.

| | |
|---|---|
| Irish | 498,793 |
| Polish | 13,032 |
| Lithuanian | 3,635 |
| United Kingdom | 3,785 |
| Latvian | 2,200 |
| Romanian | 2,406 |
| Other European | 5,978 |
| Nigerian | 1,213 |
| Other African | 728 |
| Indian | 954 |
| Other Asian | 2,721 |
| American | 1,121 |
| Brazilian | 294 |
| Other nationalities | 1,018 |
| Not stated | 9,038 |

*Table 1: Nationalities of children enrolled in primary schools across Ireland in 2016* (CSO, 2017)

Table 1 demonstrates that European continentals account for almost half of 'non-Irish national' students in schools, with Polish, U.K and Lithuanian nationals comprising the largest groups. However, the CSO (2017) maintain that the number of immigrant children in Irish primary schools is continuously rising. The statistics presented thus far support Ryan's (2015, p.32) argument that our classrooms reflect "general societal tendencies towards more heterogeneity". Aforementioned research states that resources should serve as "windows and mirrors" (Bishop, 1990, p. iii). Minority children often seek their "mirrors" in classroom resources, and when their reflections are negatively portrayed or in some cases, omitted, they may learn a "powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society in which they live" (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). This argument is in line with Haddad (2006), who claims that diverse resources are important for the self-esteem, well-being, and overall school experience of minority students. Moreover, the need for accurate classroom resources is crucial in educating children, especially those from dominant social groups who always find their "mirrors", about the diversity found in contemporary Irish society (Bryan & Bracken, 2011a). Findings from several studies suggest that the visual and verbal messages children absorb from classroom resources have a profound

influence on their attitudes towards the world and others (Derman- Sparks, 2013; IDEA, 2013; O'Toole et al., 2020). Therefore, if classroom resources present unbalanced representations of minority groups, students may develop a distorted world view, whilst potentially harbouring racist attitudes towards minority groups (Moloney & O'Toole, 2018). In the context stated above, it is evident that research into the representations of diversity in classroom resources is imperative.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using documentary analysis. According to Bailey (as cited in Ahmed, 2010, p.2), documentary research refers to the "qualitative analysis of documents that contains information about the phenomenon we wish to study". Researchers are required to collect, interpret and analyse empirical data in order to elicit meaning, gain broader understandings and draw accurate conclusions about the evidence presented (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). The literature reveals the advantages and disadvantages of documentary research. Since documentary research requires data selection instead of data collection, it is less-time consuming and more cost-efficient than other research methods (Bowen, 2009). Thus, documentary research is a favourable option for undergraduate degree programs.

However, Ahmed (2010) and Bowen (2009) warn of the potential bias in documentary research, as researchers may purposefully remove information in order to align with their own social, economic and political beliefs. It is vital that researchers are aware of this selective bias, as Ahmed (2010, p.9) asserts that "uncritical readings of texts can reproduce and reinforce marginalization of groups". In order to ensure the credibility of this research, the author examined a range of sources such as journal articles, books and government documents, and analysed them through the quality control criteria formulated by Scott (1990). This criterion includes "authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning" (Scott, 1990, p.6).

Most of the documentary analysis consisted of literature from Ireland, however a certain amount of international literature was also analysed. This literature was specific to migration-related diversity and classroom resources. The author acknowledges that there were a number of limitations, including word count; the author could have discussed a myriad of findings, however, the restrictive word count meant that only one key finding is discussed in this article. Moreover, although the researcher recognises that there is a wide range of classroom resources, only textbooks, children's literature, images and toys were examined. Documentary research was deemed the most appropriate methodology; however, this limits the data that can be used to solely secondary sources. Furthermore, since primary research has been excluded, no ethical issues will arise.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A strong theme that emerged in the literature was the importance of providing diverse resources in all classrooms, and particularly in those with a high number of immigrant students (IDEA, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013). All children require classroom resources that value diversity, incorporate multiple perspectives, challenge stereotypes and most importantly, reflect each culture in the classroom (Moloney & O'Toole, 2018).

### TEXTBOOKS

Pingel (2010) argues that the use of textbooks increases the incorporation of multicultural themes into classroom learning, which would arguably be absent if textbooks were not used. However, there are still various shortcomings to using these resources. Both Kavanagh's (2013) and Moloney and O'Toole's (2018) study found that many textbooks used in Irish schools provide limited scope for pupils to accurately see representations of those already marginalised in society, such as. While peripheral representations of diverse groups were present in some textbooks (Kavanagh, 2013), oversimplified narratives from Eurocentric perspectives, which portray 'other' cultures as problematic and 'underdeveloped' are salient. For example, the story of 'Muna' mentioned in Moloney and O'Toole's (2018) study holds implications for children from Ethiopia.

The narrative works to further marginalize and delegitimise these students, by presenting a stereotypical view of rural Ethiopia, with no reference to urban life. After reading the story of Muna and her sister travelling "barefoot to fetch water", readers are asked to identify two differences between their lives and Muna's life (Moloney & O'Toole, 2018, p. 64). Readers are further distanced as they are not asked to draw any similarities. In this regard, textbooks are not only ineffective at overcoming stereotypes, but they impact detrimentally on the experience and self-esteem of minority children. This finding is consistent with that of Bryan and Bracken (2011a), who argue against the over-reliance of textbooks in the classroom. However, it is important to bear in mind that Kavanagh (2013) only examined a small sample of textbooks, while Moloney and O'Toole (2018) focussed specifically on early years' textbooks. Therefore, these results need to be interpreted with caution, as the findings may not be representative of all textbooks operational in primary classrooms across Ireland.

Although statistics from the CSO (2017) reveal the increase of African students in Irish schools, the literature has found that negative portrayals of African groups are still omnipresent in textbooks. Olusa and Gavigan (2020) found that the African continent continues to be stereotyped as a 'country' associated with hunger, poverty and disease in textbooks, while

African people are depicted as passive receivers of aid, unable to speak for themselves. The story of Malawi in *Unlocking SESE 6th class* (Olusa & Gavigan, 2020) raises an important question on intent. Apart from Egypt, the *Unlocking SESE* series has not comprehensively examined any other African country, so why have publishers chosen a country that depicts a view of Africa at its most disadvantaged? These representations reduce the African continent, which consists of thousands of languages and cultures, to a desolate, poverty stricken 'country' in the minds of majority children (Dóchas, 2014). This finding has major implications for African students, as it is likely they will become alienated from their culture due to the superficial and one-dimensional views of Africa presented within texts.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Numerous studies suggest that children's literature is a critical component of intercultural education due to its profound influence on students' attitudes towards themselves and others (Derman-Sparks, 2013; Leahy & Foley, 2018; Wilson, 2014). Despite calls to increase representations of diversity in books, extensive research has found that children from minority groups often have few literary "mirrors" to affirm their identity in books and novels (Dolan, 2014; Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016, Wilson, 2014). Similarly, the Co-operative Children's Book Centre (CCBC) is an American research library that collects thousands of children's books from around the world each year and analyses them for diverse characteristics, with a specific focus on racial and ethnic diversity. *Table 2* states the percentage of children's books that included diverse characters in 2015 compared to those published in 2018.

|  | 2015 | 2018 |
|---|---|---|
| American Indians | 0.9% | 1.6% |
| Latinx | 2.4 % | 5.9% |
| Asian | 3.3% | 9% |
| African/ African American | 7.6% | 11.7% |
| Animals/ trucks etc. | 12.5% | 27% |
| White | 73.3% | 50% |

*Table 2: Percentages of children's books that depict diverse characters* (CCBC, 2015, 2018)

Results from the CCBC (2015, 2018) in *Table 2* indicate that although there has been a slight improvement from 2015 to 2018, a continuous lack of racially and ethnically diverse characters is still omnipresent. However, these findings are limited and cannot be extrapolated to all Irish schools. Even though the CCBC evaluate a large sample of children's books from around the world each year, they are not necessarily representative of the books specifically found in Irish classrooms. A more comprehensive study would investigate the representations of diverse

characters in children's books used in Irish education settings and include data on how this diversity reflects the actual percentages of these populations in classrooms around Ireland.

IMAGES

Studies relating to the images used in Irish primary school classrooms found that not only was there a minimal number of images depicting minority groups, but these pictures were more likely to reproduce rather than undermine stereotypes, as immigrants were often neglected or depicted in a less favourable light in school images (Bryan & Bracken, 2011a; IDEA, 2013; Gyoy, 2008). Kavanagh's (2013) analysis revealed that the images included in the display entitled 'Kolkata', found in a Catholic primary school, remained rooted in a donor mentality, as she described the "vivid images of ramshackle towns, bedraggled children, polluted environments and giving charitable aid to powerless people" that feature in the display (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 135).

The proliferation of negative imagery disempowers immigrant children, especially those from India or other parts of Asia, as they may begin to feel devalued in the classroom. Moreover, majority children may develop "inaccurate and incomplete understandings that are based upon adverse stereotypes" (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 135). Therefore, it seems that the ancient Chinese proverb, 'one picture is worth a thousand words' remains as pertinent as ever, as the bleak and stereotypical images of India leave a lasting impression that is more likely to foster deep rooted prejudices than written text (Gyoy, 2008). A more diverse display would attempt to balance the bleak depictions of poverty by including various images that depict the prosperity of India, such as its renowned manufacturing cities, its centres of technology, its cultural richness and its democracy While it is not suggested that teachers would completely conceal images of hardship and portray a romanticised view of the world (IDEA, 2013), images used in the classroom should be consciously chosen to exhibit fairness and positively reflect the diverse groups that make up the class.

TOYS

Toys in the classroom should reflect the social realities of Ireland in order to foster a sense of self-importance in immigrant children (NCCA, 2005). However, international studies found that the production of diverse toys is only a recent phenomenon, as seen with the launch of 'Toy like Me' in 2018, a company that produces a range of multicultural toys, including Asian dolls and games inspired by different cultures, and Irish-owned brand 'Lottie Dolls' in 2012, which focuses on producing toys that represent all children, regardless of race or ethnicity (Almeida, 2017; Harkin, 2019). Although it is important to recognise progress, no matter where the starting point, there are still a myriad of problems that permeate the toy industry. International studies found

that darker skin tones, wider noses, fuller lips and ethnic fashion are often not considered when making Black dolls and instead, they are produced by pouring brown plastic into the same moulds used for White dolls. It was also found that multicultural play materials are generally not available in major toy outlets worldwide (Almeida, 2017; Carroll, 2014; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). However, the presence of multicultural toys in schools around Ireland remains briefly addressed in the literature. Henceforth, the current study cannot conclusively determine the adequacy of multicultural toys found in Irish classrooms.

## CONCLUSION

The specific objective of this study was to analyse how the diversity of contemporary Irish society is represented in classroom resources. It is imperative that classroom resources serve as "mirrors" which reflect the lives of all children and "windows" that reflect the true diversity of society (Bishop, 1990). However, the materials examined in this research did not provide these opportunities. Moloney and O'Toole's (2018) and Olusa and Gavigan's (2020) analysis of textbooks found that minority students are oftentimes omitted or represented in a manner that offends and delegitimises their heritage. While peripheral representations of diversity were evident in some books, it was found that other books work to maintain the status quo and the notion of White superiority.

Similarly, Kavanagh's (2013) research found that the images used in primary classrooms operate from a narrow understanding of what it means to be a child in an Irish primary classroom. The findings reported in this study shed light on the detrimental impacts the lack of diverse resources has on minority students. When resources present inaccurate or unbalanced perspectives, minority children may infer that they are not valued members of the school community or society, thus impacting negatively on their self-esteem, wellbeing and overall school experience (Haddad, 2006). Moreover, the materials examined in this study also hold implications for teaching all children about diversity. Evidently, the resources neglect to encourage multicultural understanding and there is a risk that stereotypes may become a reality for majority children (Moloney & O'Toole, 2018). Therefore, from the documentary research and examples which were analysed, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that many classroom resources do not accurately reflect the diversity found in contemporary Irish schools and society. Although it is important to recognise the progress that has been made in some industries, the overall negative representations of the diversity now present in modern Irish society can result in minority children feeling further marginalized, while majority students may develop a distorted world view.

Publishers, authors and manufacturers need to be aware of the implications of these findings when producing materials that may be used in primary classrooms. To be fully inclusive, the author recommends that any material claiming to be multicultural must lay heavy emphasis on the positive portrayal of minority groups, challenge stereotypes and explore diversity by offering multiple perspectives. However, like any industry, publishers are financially motivated, and whatever sells will continue to be produced (Bryan & Bracken, 2011a). Therefore, all people interested in change must commit to making conscious decisions when buying products, as the market must see constant demand for diverse materials before much needed change can occur. It is hoped that if improvements are made in relation to the presence of multicultural resources in Irish classrooms, schools can become places of mutual respect, where all children can thrive and feel accepted. The author fervently looks forward to a future where classroom resources offer "windows" and "mirrors" that accurately represent the lives of all children, rather than distorted reflections through cracked glass.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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