



Mirrors & Windows



Developing anti-racist education through books



"Children have the right to books that reflect their own images and books that open less familiar worlds to them"
Rudine Sims Bishop

1. Mirrors and Windows

Books have the power to shape the way children see themselves and the world.

They can act as **mirrors** that reflect what we know about ourselves and the world we live in. They can also act as **windows** into worlds and experiences that are different to our own.

For many years children in Scotland who are Black, Brown or from other marginalised groups including the Gypsy/Traveller community, have often seen themselves stereotyped, misrepresented, tokenised or not represented at all in the predominantly Eurocentric curriculum and resources on offer in schools and nurseries.



Dr Rudine Sims Bishop first came up with the term 'Windows and Mirrors' when thinking about books. Listen to her explain the idea in this [short video](#) (1.5 mins)



For guidance on having productive and courageous conversations about race, read [this article](#):
'Shhhhhh! Don't say the R word!'

As educators, it's important that the books we choose reflect the lives of all our children and the diverse and interconnected world we live in.

Stories and 'story time' offer opportunities for conversations about race and social justice with learners. Thoughtful selection of books and their use can support children to develop empathy, understand different perspectives and celebrate diversity.

This resource encourages you to **critically reflect** on the resources in use in your school or nursery and provides practical guidance for **auditing** and **using** books in your setting.

COLOUR BLIND = COLOUR SILENT

As educators, it is important to **actively talk about race and acknowledge differences**, even if it can feel scary for fear of saying 'the wrong thing'. It's ok to get things wrong if you use it as a learning experience and apologise to anyone you've unintentionally hurt. Taking a 'colour blind' approach - staying silent about race - denies the lived realities of how the colour of your skin impacts people's experiences in Scotland today. It also robs children of the opportunity to celebrate their heritage and build pride in their identity.

Creating brave spaces for discussion where we embrace productive discomfort is where growth and learning happens.

"You can't be what you can't see"

Marian Wright Edelman

Books as mirrors

Some books act as 'mirrors', allowing readers to see themselves in the characters, experiences or storylines. It's important that *all* children in our schools and nursery settings have the opportunity to read books that feature people that look like them, and have similar lives and experiences. It's uplifting and empowering when children meet a character they can relate to. By seeing aspects of themselves in these 'mirror' books, children understand that their lives have value and their stories are worth telling.

Books as windows

Some books act as 'windows' into other lives and experiences, perhaps very different from our own, breaking down stereotypes and helping us see the world from different perspectives.

If a child grows up *only* reading books that are mirrors and not windows, they will lose out on understanding and connecting with the rich diversity of our world. **Reading only mirror books may well lead to a false sense of what the world is like and their own place in it.** In more rural and remote areas of Scotland with very little visible diversity, books might be one of the only places where children can 'meet' and engage with people who look different to themselves.

In addition, it is important for children living in Scotland to have access to books set in other countries, including the majority world*, to **support them to build connections between their own lives and people around the world.** Ideally these books would be written by an author from those countries, who have authentic, lived experience of the place and the issues being explored. Reading 'window' books offers children valuable insights into other lives, experiences and ways of being, broadening their perspective and understanding of the world around them.

* **Majority world** is a term used to describe the countries and people that make up the majority of the world's population. These are the countries that have historically been described as 'developing' or 'the Global South'.

"If all that our children see are reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world"

Rudine Sims Bishop

Watch Grace Lin's engaging TED talk on the importance of mirrors *and* windows in books (12 min)



“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

Audrey Lourde



Books as Prisms

Just as a prism bends and splits light into many colours at once, books can help children to see how different parts of a person's identity, like race, gender, age, class and sexuality all come together to affect their life experiences in different ways. This idea is called **intersectionality**.

Including books in your library that act like prisms can support children to understand that **people's lives aren't defined by one thing** but by the way many parts of their identity overlap: that each person's story and experience is unique.



White privilege does not mean life for all white people is easy. It just means that your skin colour isn't one of the things making it harder. If you hold white privilege it means you do *not* have to face obstacles or disadvantages because of your race, so it can be easy for it to go unnoticed.

Eurocentrism & White Privilege

When considering intersectionality and anti-racism in Scotland, it's important to acknowledge white privilege and the dominant Eurocentric worldview. This can show up in a school library in several ways including:

- The majority of books, especially classics and mainstream bestsellers, **centring white protagonists and authors**
- Non-European cultures being **underrepresented** in history, literature, and reference books
- Books featuring Black and Brown people being limited to stories about **oppression** (e.g. civil rights struggles or slavery) rather than **a full range of experiences** (e.g. joy, adventure or everyday life)
- Books by white authors being classified as “general” literature, while books by Black and Brown authors are classified as “multicultural” or “diverse,” **othering** these perspectives
- **Outdated** or **Eurocentric language** being used in books or to label or categorise book collections.



Listen to John Amaechi explain the concept of white privilege in this 2.5 min [BBC Bitesize video](#)

"The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



Listen to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's [TED talk](#) (19 min)

The Danger of a Single Story

Historically, the Scottish Curriculum has been largely Eurocentric, focusing on European history, literature and perspectives while overlooking the contributions, histories and cultures of people from other parts of the world. This can give a narrow and one-sided view of history and society, reinforcing ideas of European superiority and ignoring the impacts of colonialism and empire.

In her TED talk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shares how growing up reading only British and American literature led her to believe story books did not include people like her or her community. This limited perspective - what she calls a **"single story"** - created a narrow understanding of whose experiences belong in books.

As educators, **it is vital to recognise how single stories shape children's identities and perceptions and can become so ingrained that they may not even notice their impact.** Including diverse voices, histories and perspectives disrupts these stereotypes, encouraging a richer and more accurate worldview.

Moving Beyond a 'Tourist Curriculum'

An effective anti-racist approach avoids a 'tourist curriculum' where diverse or marginalised voices are only included once in a while, or at specific times of the year like Black History Month, or Chinese New Year. This tokenistic approach communicates the idea that some identities are only valued occasionally, whereas others are affirmed all the time. This can strengthen unconscious beliefs about white supremacy (that white skin is 'better' or more valued than any other colour), which harms children of all identities.

Our nursery and school libraries need to act as mirrors and windows for all our children, offering diverse stories so all children can develop empathy and learn to understand and celebrate the diversity and interconnectedness of the world we live in. Careful selection of books allows you, the educator, to set the tone around important issues for children, **fostering a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment and creating a safe space for children to learn from and about each other, and the wider world.**



2. Auditing your books

The aim of this guide is to support educators, and children, in Scottish nurseries and primary schools to develop a critical awareness about the choice of books and reading schemes on offer in school settings and their impact. Auditing these helps focus attention on whose stories are being told: who is present, who is missing or marginalised, and why. It can also help identify problematic books that might perpetuate negative stereotypes. Throughout this section you will find reflective questions and tools to guide you.

Staff and families in a setting will change over the years, so it's important to continually audit the books in use.

A note on terms/language

- **Racism** - This can take both **active forms** (e.g. verbal harassment, physical violence, intentional acts of discrimination) and **passive forms** (e.g. silence in the presence of racist remarks, unexamined policies and practices that disproportionately impact Black and Brown people and other minoritised communities, or the failure to acknowledge the contributions of these individuals).
- **Anti-Racism** - this is the **active process of challenging racism** and the beliefs, behaviours, structures and policies that perpetuate racism.
- **Majority World** - We use the term majority world rather than 'Developing World', 'Global South' or 'Third World' because it **accurately reflects that most of the global population lives in these regions**, avoiding negative connotations of inferiority. It emphasises inclusivity, agency and dignity, while shifting away from outdated, hierarchical ideas of development.
- **Black and Brown** - we have used the term **Black and Brown people** in this resource, though we recognise other communities who are minoritised and face discrimination (like Gypsy/Traveller communities) are not included in this term.

We recognise that using **any single term can be problematic and can oversimplify the diverse experiences and identities within these groups**, potentially masking the unique challenges and systemic issues faced by different communities. It can also inadvertently reinforce a binary understanding of race, neglecting the nuances and intersections of identity, culture and social status among the groups it aims to represent.



It is always important to check with staff, children and their families as to how they wish to be identified.

Visit the **Anti-Racist Educator website** for a useful glossary of terms

"We think we see the world as it is, when
in fact we see the world as we are."
Anaïs Nin

Before We Start

Reflecting on ourselves

Unconsciously or consciously, the books we choose to use in our setting will be influenced by our own identities and life experiences.

Consider:

- How do **aspects of my own identity** influence the books I select and how I use them with children?
- Are there any '**single stories**' in my own thinking about people or places that influence the selection of books in my setting?
- What stories and characters am I **drawn to**? Which do I **shy away from**? Why?
- Does my teaching and the resources I choose take account of **multiple perspectives and points of view** or is it mainly "white/British"?



Your unique
perspective!
What frames how you
see the world?
The **social identity**
wheel is an interesting
exercise to explore as
an educator and with
older children.

Reflecting on the children in our setting

As educators, we need to be mindful of the **diverse experiences and backgrounds** of the children in our setting when choosing books. It's important to consider how a book might **resonate with or challenge a child's view of themselves and others**, recognising that each child brings their own unique life experiences which can shape their response to the material. Being aware of **potential trauma** is also essential, as certain themes or narratives may unintentionally trigger painful memories or feelings. At the same time, **children's prior experiences** can add valuable perspectives to discussions, enriching the learning experience for everyone.

Before selecting books to use consider:

- Who are the children in my setting? Is there anything more I need to know/find out?
- What prior knowledge or experience do they bring?
- How do the children view themselves and the people around them?

Reflective questions to support your audit

When reviewing your current book collection or considering new additions, these are some of the things to keep in mind where relevant:

Author

- Who wrote and illustrated the book? Do they share background/lived experiences with the main characters?

Characters/Character Development

- Who is the main character? Who is being centred in the book and who is being marginalised?
- Do Black/Brown/other minoritised characters hold the power and drive the narrative in the book, or are they relegated to being background or supporting characters to a white protagonist?
- Are Black/Brown/other minoritised characters in the story fully developed individuals or one dimensional tokenistic 'nods' to diversity?
- Who are we being encouraged to empathise with in the story?
- Within your book collection, can *all* children in your setting find characters that look like them?

Themes/Ideas/Setting

- Does the book perpetuate negative stereotypes, eg 'poor' Black or Brown people in need of 'saving' by rich (white) people, or that all people in the majority world live rural and traditional lives?
- Does the book exoticise characters by focusing entirely on visible traits or traditions, while ignoring similarities and the day to day realities of people?
- Within your book collection featuring Black/Brown/minoritised main characters, is there a diversity of storylines e.g celebrating joy and achievement or everyday and fantastical experiences, rather than just stories about overcoming prejudice and discrimination?
- Within your book collection, are there stories from a range of countries? Do the settings in the books reflect the diversity of lives in that country? e.g. rural and urban, modern and traditional.

Language/Images/Data

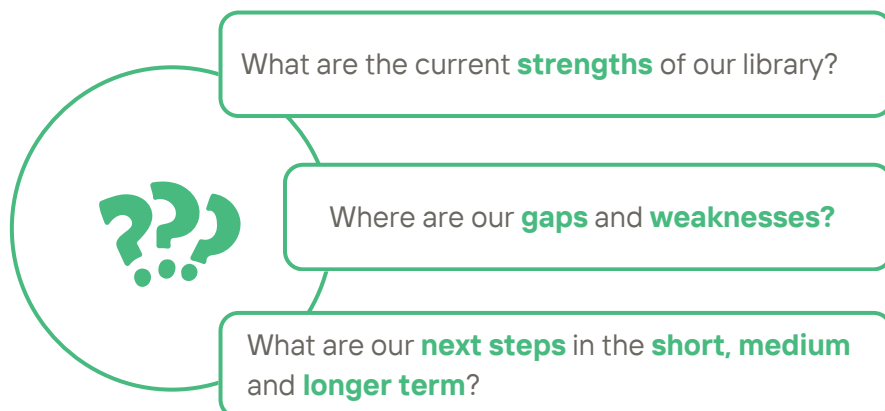
- If non-fiction: Are the information and statistics up to date? Are the photos of people and places recent? Do the images align with the values of respect and dignity for others?
- Do the images of people or places have the potential to create single narratives/stereotypes?
- Is the language outdated? Could the language used marginalise, exclude or cause harm?
- Are there books which celebrate the home languages of the children in my setting?

Reviews and Recommendations

- When researching a book to buy, who is recommending it? Are there any criticisms, and by whom?

Reflecting on your library

After using the guidance on the previous page to review your books, consider:



↓ [Download these questions on a printable sheet](#)

It can be a powerful learning experience for children to be actively involved in auditing their library. You could invite them to become 'book detectives', developing their critical thinking skills through analysing the books.



If you want to do a quantitative audit, you can use this **tally sheet**. This is also available as a **spreadsheet** which can convert your data into pie charts.



The focus of this audit is around **racial identity**. This could be expanded to include other aspects of identity including gender, family structure, ability, neurodiversity, socio-economic status.....

Problematic books

Once you've cast a critical eye over your library using the guidance in this section you may well have identified some books as problematic. But now what to do with them?

- **Use it as a learning opportunity** - have conversations with colleagues and, where appropriate, children, about why it's no longer going to be part of your setting's library.
- **Consider what happens to the book once you've removed it from the library.** For example, putting the book in the recycling rather than donating it to a charity shop. If it contains racist imagery or language, or content that perpetuates unhelpful or negative stereotypes, it is **important that it's out of circulation**.

3. Using books with children

Auditing and diversifying your library is a great step toward anti-racism, but it's not enough on its own, because meaningful anti-racist work requires *action* beyond representation. It's also important to create safer, braver spaces for discussion where children can not only learn about racism but develop the values of **equity** and **social justice**.

Book Suggestions

Here you can find a curated list of books for **Early, First and Second Levels**. These books go beyond exploring race and racism - they showcase strong Black, Brown and Gypsy/Traveller characters living everyday lives or embarking on exciting adventures across diverse genres, settings and themes. Most are also written by authors who share identities and experiences with their protagonists.

 **Click on the books below to download the lists:**



Dismantling 'us' and 'them' thinking

- We are **all** different!
- **Everyone** has a culture and ethnicity
- Explore '**our**' diversity not '**their**' differences
- People who are **different** (from you) are **not necessarily the same** (as each other)

From the work of Ryma Halfaoui & Vicky Donnelly

Engaging children in discussion

- **Model positive attitudes to difference and diversity.** Remember it's not 'them' and 'us' - every one of us is different and unique.
- **Tone matters.** The way we communicate is just as important as the message. Talking about race in an awkward or hesitant way can reinforce the idea that it's a topic to be avoided.
- **Saying the wrong thing.** Mistakes will happen, and that's okay! The fear of saying something wrong shouldn't stop you from discussing race. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, apologise and listen.
- **If a child makes a negative statement** about a character in the book based on their skin tone/hair/dress, this is an important teachable moment. Ask non-judgemental questions like: 'Why do you think that?' or 'What makes you say that?' to better understand any underlying assumptions and then work to address them.
- **Openly acknowledge the ways individuals and families can differ**, but avoid labelling characters by those differences.
- **Use the words 'fair' and 'unfair'** when talking about stereotypes, marginalisation and power imbalances.

This framework can support planning and discussions when using books with children:

Asking Questions/Supporting Curiosity

- **Encourage children to ask questions about what they see or read.** Be honest if you don't know the answer - and support them to research accurate answers.
- **Follow children's curiosity and wonder** using books to help scaffold conversations. e.g. If a child asks about why one person's skin is darker than another's, you could read together about melanin and its role in a book that is age-appropriate (see our suggested book titles on p9.)

Assessing Learning

- After reading the book, what do the children now know - about **themselves, the issues and the wider world?**
- What would they like to learn **next?**

Responding as Active Global Citizens

- Discuss where the opportunities may be to **act for positive change** on the issues or situations in the story.



**A framework
for planning
and learning**

Making Connections

- Encourage children to make connections between:
 - People** - what experiences do they have in common with the characters?
 - Issues** - how are different issues in the story connected, to each other, or to our own lives?
 - Time** - how might actions in the past have contributed to this issue/situation? What might happen next?
- Consider what links can be made to **children's prior knowledge or experiences**

Exploring Viewpoints & Values

- **Explore Assumptions:** When reading a book for the first time, it can be useful to ask children what they think the book will be about, based on the front cover. This can help uncover assumptions or stereotypes that children may hold, and can then be revisited after reading the book.
- **Explore different perspectives** by encouraging children to ask themselves 'how would I feel if I was this character?' or 'what would I do in this situation?'
- **Scaffold critical literacy skills** and encourage children to reflect on how books can reinforce or challenge systems of power by asking:
 - Whose story is this? Who is telling the story?
 - Whose voices are missing?
 - Who are the dominant characters in the story? Who acts in the story and who is acted upon?
 - What other perspectives might help us better understand the issue or situation in the story?

Philosophy for Children (P4C)

Any of the recommended books would make a rich stimulus for a philosophical enquiry with your children:

- **Read** the book together.
- Invite children to **discuss in pairs** what they found interesting or important about the book and note everything down on the board.
- Collectively come up with a few possibilities of a **philosophical question** based on what has been shared.
- Conduct a **secret vote** on the question to be discussed.
- **Generate first thoughts** on the question in pairs and then share as a group.
- **Facilitate a philosophical dialogue.** For more guidance on how to do this as part of a wider P4C approach see [here](#).

The examples in [this guidance](#) from [antiracist.scot](#) can be used to co-create safer braver spaces for discussion with learners (Level 2)

Additional Professional Learning and Resources



Seeds for Change
Global Citizenship
through play at Early
Level



**Scotland's Anti-Racist
Education website**
Early to 3rd Level



**Signposts Anti-Racist
Education resource
sheet** for teachers



**Anti-Racist Toolkit
for teachers**



For more recommendations of great fiction titles, searchable by topic and level, check out the [Signposts fiction list](#). The main website also has a searchable database of online [Global Citizenship Education resources](#) to support learning on wide range of topics.



For more **training and support** in **Anti-Racist Education** in your school or nursery contact [Highland One World](#) if you're in the North of Scotland, or find your local **Development Education Centre** [here](#).

"One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world."

Malala Yousafzai



www.highlandoneworld.org.uk

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