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Using Stories to Encourage Racial Inclusion in Schools

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Contents

This book is born out of a powerful combination of passion for its subject matter and hands-on classroom experience, and as such it deserves our attention. Stories are so powerful, and negative narratives so toxic, that we all have a duty to get this right. In particular I’m delighted by its final affirmation that, ‘You are God’s story’: such a powerful, positive message is not only for our children and young people, irrespective of their background, but for us all.

Philip Mounstephen, Bishop of Winchester

Acknowledgments

My thanks to all the members of the Winchester and Portsmouth Diocesan Education Team, whose ideas I have used here, to the teachers in our schools who have road-tested our resources, and of course to the pupils who have brought it all to life!

Jane Kelly

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1 Introduction: Why Stories?

'In the beginning was the story…and the story was with God, and the story was God.'[1] Stories matter. Every culture has its significant narratives; they help us make sense of our own lives and the world around us. The Bible is full of stories, and Jesus was the ultimate storyteller. As anyone who works with children and young people knows, stories can engage their emotions and imaginations, open up new perspectives and a good storybook can stimulate conversations about potentially controversial topics such as race. This book will explore the ability of children's books to generate meaningful discussions about diversity and racial justice. In particular, it will focus on a project run by the Education Team at the Dioceses of Winchester and Portsmouth, which used the well-loved book *An Angel Just Like Me,* by Mary Hoffman, to promote discussions about the racial stereotypes associated with the Christmas story. It will also provide other practical ideas for using stories to equip teachers, parents and significant adults to talk about race in a natural, non-threatening way, to connect with other people's stories and in turn to create new stories.

Churches are discovering the potential of children's stories to talk about faith

While most of the examples in this book are from primary school settings, many of these ideas could also be adapted for older students. Many secondary schools are well aware of the power of stories and will already use good children's books as a springboard for discussions in collective worship or tutor time, including picture books such as *The Rainbow Fish* or *The Selfish Crocodile.* Equally, many churches are discovering the potential of children's stories to help parents and children talk about faith and apply it to the real world, so church children and families' workers will also find practical ideas here, which they can adapt for their own parishes. Chapter four explores *Chatting Faith*, a project devised by the Dioceses of Winchester and Portsmouth as part of the Church of England's *Growing Faith* initiative, which uses picture books to encourage families to have safe, relaxed conversations about faith.

This book also includes a chapter written by Alysia-Lara Ayonrinde, the Church of England's National Education Lead for Racial Justice. Alysia-Lara writes about her own story of being a mixed-heritage child in a largely white

classroom, drawing on her experience as a teacher and senior leader to offer practical suggestions for story-based learning about race and racial justice.

The Bible Story

The big story of the Bible is a narrative that celebrates racial and cultural diversity. Most primary school teachers are familiar with story mountains, which help children plan stories with an opening, a build-up of tension, a climax, a resolution and an ending. The narrative arc of the Bible tells the history of God's dealings with human beings, from creation, where people of all cultures and ethnicities are made in God's image, through repeated human failure to follow God's teaching—bringing hatred and division into the world—to the birth of the one who will usher in God's kingdom of peace and justice, and ending with a vision in Revelation 7 of people from all nations and races worshipping God together. It is a celebration of racial diversity. Along the way we hear tales of Abraham being chosen in Genesis 12 as God's way of blessing the nations, and foreigners such as Ruth being welcomed into the Israelite story. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God reminds the Israelites that they were once foreigners in Egypt and so they in turn must provide for aliens and strangers (*eg* Exod 22.21; Lev 19.9–10). Jesus' first visitors were despised shepherds and foreign magi, demonstrating God's generous inclusivity, and his family lived on the margins of society, including experiencing life as refugees. Jesus' life and teaching give clear examples of him reaching out to foreigners and outsiders, from the centurion's servant (Luke 7.1–10) to the Syrophoenician woman's daughter (Mark 7.24–30). His stories are full of encouragements to befriend foreigners, including the much-loved Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 tells us that we will be judged by—amongst other things—how well we treat strangers.

The narrative arc of the Bible is a celebration of racial diversity

The Pentecost narrative affirms racial diversity, as each person hears God speaking in their own language; God recognizes their individual cultures, rather than expecting them to conform to a monocultural norm. The Book of Acts shows the early church working out what this means in practice and Paul's letters teach that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek (Gal 3.28–29). The Bible concludes with the picture in Revelation of all nations and cultures united in worship: 'There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb' (Rev 7.9). Although the Bible has been used by some throughout history to set barriers and exclude people, a more accurate reading of the biblical record shows a God who loves all humanity, sides with the marginalized and welcomes the stranger. This is the story we want to share

with our children and young people, so that it captures their imaginations, encourages them to welcome those who may look or sound different, and helps them tell new stories about themselves and the wider world.

Reading the Bible through a racial lens clearly shows that God values all races and cultures and that this is at the heart of the Christian gospel. Our modern school system still fails many pupils from a UKME/GMH background, and so it is imperative that school leaders and Christians who are involved in their local schools understand what the Bible story has to say about race and that they have the courage to live out its teaching.[2] If we believe that we are all made in God's image, then we have a responsibility to treat everyone as if that were true. This will include demonstrating God's inclusive hospitality to pupils and families of all cultures and ethnicities, so that everyone knows that they are welcome and everyone can flourish. The Church of England's *Vision for Education* is a vision of every child and young person living life in all its fullness, including those from different cultures, those with additional needs, or those with challenging behaviour or attitudes. This book aims to give practical suggestions for using stories to help pupils from different racial backgrounds feel visible and valued, and to encourage every member of our school communities to celebrate difference.

In our next chapter, Alysia-Lara Ayonrinde, the Church of England Lead for Racial Justice, shares her own story of feeling excluded by the stories in her primary school classroom, and her mission as a teacher to introduce her pupils to stories that would broaden their horizons and ensure that every child in her class felt seen. She includes a number of practical ideas for schools, to ensure that every child's voice is heard.

Questions for Reflection

- What stories have been significant in your life?
- Which parts of the Bible message particularly resonate with you?
- What do you think of the idea that the Bible is a story about celebrating difference?

Alysia-Lara Ayonrinde

2 The Power of Stories

As a mixed-heritage British woman of Nigerian and Brazilian descent, my journey with literature began in the cosy confines of a Year 4 classroom in London. At that tender age, I was enthralled by the enchanting world of stories, losing myself in the words and the images they conjured. The one who guided me through this magical realm was my teacher, a figure of wisdom and knowledge. Little did I know that this enchantment would soon be tinged with a sense of exclusion and the realization that I did not exist within the stories that unfolded before me.

I did not exist within the stories that unfolded before me

I remember these moments vividly, those afternoons when my teacher would read stories aloud to the class. As the words flowed and the characters came to life, it became painfully apparent that none of these tales featured anyone who looked or sounded like me. Did I question it at the time? No. I was a young and impressionable child, eager to soak in the knowledge that my teacher imparted. Did I think about it? Absolutely.

In those formative years, a subtle dissonance began to gnaw at me. The stories I encountered, the characters I encountered, they were all so different from the life I lived, the people I knew. While I was raised by my wonderful parents to respect my teachers, to listen and to work hard in school, something just did not feel right. I was being shown images and told stories that seemed to exist in an alternate universe—one where I did not belong. It was as though I were an outsider looking in on a world that could never truly be mine.

These tales often painted images of biblical figures I did not recognize and presented a form of Christianity that did not align with my family's beliefs and practices. My mother, with her Brazilian heritage, brought with her a rich cultural tapestry from Bahia. In our tribe in Bahia, we practice Candomblé, a vibrant and deeply spiritual faith that blends indigenous beliefs with Catholicism. It is a matriarchal tradition, a thing of beauty, a source of strength and it makes me feel seen and safe.

As I grew older and delved deeper into the world of literature, the absence of diversity became even more pronounced. The literary landscape was seemingly devoid of characters who shared aspects of my heritages, my rich cultural

background, my unique blend of Nigerian and Brazilian influences. It was as though my narrative had been sidelined, my story deemed less significant.

Yet, in the midst of this dissonance, there was a profound realization that emerged. I understood that literature, though it may not have been reflective of my own experiences, possessed the power to bridge gaps, foster understanding and awaken empathy. I was determined to seek out and celebrate the voices and stories that resonated with my heritage.

My love for literature never waned; it only grew stronger. I began to explore books that celebrated diversity and inclusion, that told stories of people like me, people from various backgrounds, people whose narratives deserved to be heard. These books, with their multicultural characters and varied settings, allowed me to connect with the world in a way that I had never experienced before.

In the midst of the literary pages, I found a sanctuary where my heritage was not just accepted but celebrated. It was a place where I could embrace the richness of my Nigerian and Brazilian ancestry, where the stories I read began to echo the tapestry of my own life. Literature became a mirror reflecting my identity and a window into the vast world of human experiences.

Literature became a mirror reflecting my identity

As I moved forward in my literary journey, I realized that my ambition was not just to find my own story within the pages of books, but to also contribute to the diversification of literature. I aspired to share and write stories that could resonate with children of many different backgrounds, to create characters and narratives that would make them feel seen, heard and valued.

In doing so, I hope to inspire a new generation of young readers to cherish their own identities, to celebrate the beautiful mosaic of their heritage and to appreciate the diverse world around them.

The Danger of the Single Story

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's thought-provoking TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, serves as an important reminder of the limitations and perils of reducing complex identities and cultures to a singular narrative.[3] Her words echo not only through the realm of literature but also resonate profoundly in our lives and the lives of children and young people. The 'single story' approach perpetuates the telling of incomplete, one-dimensional stories, incapable of capturing the rich tapestry of human experiences. It is these limited narratives that reinforce biases, nurture misconceptions and fuel damaging stereotypes. As we consider our identities and those of children and young

people, we must take into account that our identities are multi-faceted and ever-changing, woven intricately into the fluid fabric of culture.

One question that demands our attention is: which stories are being told and by whom? In a world where power dynamics have often dictated the narratives that take precedence, it is crucial to amplify marginalized voices and allow for a broader, more inclusive representation of stories. Whose stories we choose to listen to, celebrate and amplify can significantly impact the way our identities are formed, and how the perceptions of children and young people develop about their place in the world.

'Who holds the pen?' is a question that forces us to confront the power structures and systems that influence storytelling. As we strive for a more equitable society, where all identities are recognized and celebrated, it is imperative to democratize the process of storytelling. This means ensuring that marginalized communities have the opportunity to express their own narratives rather than being subjected to external portrayals which can be dehumanizing and reductive.

Stories have the extraordinary capacity to uplift, inspire and foster empathy

Stories have the extraordinary capacity to uplift, inspire and foster empathy. In our schools, churches and communities, it is vital to create spaces where narratives can empower individuals to embrace their full, multi-faceted identities. The stories we tell and those we choose to emphasize must highlight the strength, resilience and diverse experiences of different communities.

When it comes to race and the broader social construct of identity, our world is often constrained by preconceived notions. Typically, when people think of race, a mental image of a Black or Brown person often ensues. It is crucial to broaden this perspective and also amplify the stories of other racially marginalized groups, for example, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. The beauty of their identities and stories are just as important, as these communities are arguably the most discriminated-against racial group in England. By embracing these narratives, we acknowledge the incredible diversity that exists within our society and challenge stereotypes, helping to repair the broken dignity of the most marginalized.

Practical Ideas for Schools

Teachers play a vital role in shaping the perspectives and values of their students. Harnessing the power of stories can be a transformative tool in promoting diversity, equity, inclusion and justice within an educational context. Here are some practical ideas for teachers looking to integrate these principles into their teaching:

Diverse Book Selection

Conduct an audit of your school library and classroom book corners. Non-fiction books that are over ten years old could be recycled or donated to charity. When buying new books, choose books, literature and resources that reflect a wide range of cultures, backgrounds, experiences and identities. Ensure your classroom library includes works by authors from various ethnicities, genders and perspectives. Be mindful of the protagonists and themes so as to expose students to different voices and experiences.

In the world of fairy tales, Cinderella is an iconic character, yet it is crucial to recognize that her story comes in a multitude of forms, with over 500 variations worldwide. However, in many primary classrooms, one version, penned by Charles Perrault, often takes centre stage. Perrault's Cinderella, while enchanting, tends to portray a singular, and often Eurocentric, representation of beauty and grace.

The importance of diverse representation in the stories we present to our young learners cannot be overstated. Every culture and community holds its unique narratives and definitions of beauty. By exclusively focusing on one interpretation, we inadvertently limit the horizons of our children's imagination and understanding. In doing so, we risk reinforcing narrow beauty standards that can negatively impact self-esteem and self-worth.

The Penguin document, *Lit in Colour*, is particularly useful for encouraging diversity in the books we select for our schools.[4]

Author Visits

Whenever possible, invite authors from diverse backgrounds to speak to your pupils. Virtual author visits can also be arranged, making them more accessible. Authors can share their personal stories and insights, fostering an appreciation for diverse voices in literature, as well as celebrating their success and excellence.

Culturally-responsive Teaching

Implement culturally-responsive teaching practices that honour and value pupils' diverse backgrounds. This can include incorporating traditions, holidays and cultural celebrations into the curriculum, as well as allowing students to share their own cultural experiences.

Empathy-building

Select books and stories that highlight characters who experience various forms of discrimination or injustice. This can help pupils develop empathy by understanding the challenges others face and thus promote the value of justice. Include books that do not explicitly feature people of colour when ad-

dressing issues such as discrimination, yet allow the concept to be explored in a different context. For example, *Varmints,* by Helen Ward and Mark Craste.

Critical Analysis

Encourage critical thinking by having students analyze texts for stereotypes, biases and inequities. After creating a psychologically safe space, discuss these issues openly, allowing students to question and deconstruct problematic representations.

Story Circles

Create a space for students to share their own stories, heritage or family traditions. This promotes understanding and appreciation of their peers' backgrounds and can help bridge gaps between different communities.

Inclusive Narratives

Focus on narratives that showcase the intersectionality of identities. Explore stories where individuals experience multiple aspects of their identity simultaneously, such as race, gender and socioeconomic status.

Historical Narratives

Explore historical accounts from underrepresented communities. This can include learning about the civil rights movement, indigenous history and other moments of social change that have shaped the world.

Collaborative Projects

Encourage students to work on projects that revolve around the creation of their own stories. This can involve writing, art or multimedia presentations which reflect their experiences, identity and values.

Across the Curriculum Subjects

By embedding diversity and inclusion through stories across the curriculum subjects, teachers can create an inclusive and equitable learning environment where students gain a deeper understanding of the diverse world around them. This approach not only enriches educational experience but also promotes empathy, critical thinking and a commitment to social justice.

Our identities are not monolithic; they are multifaceted, constantly evolving and deeply intertwined with the ever-changing landscapes of culture. By promoting diverse and inclusive stories, we nurture understanding, empathy and respect for the rich tapestry of human experiences. As we look to the future, let us recognize the power of stories as a force for justice, unity and celebration of our individual and collective narratives. In the end, our shared stories are what bind us together, bridging gaps and weaving more inclusive and equitable communities.

Questions for Reflection

- Have you ever felt excluded by the stories other people have told?
- Are you aware of telling narratives that may exclude other people?
- What are some of the ways we can allow everyone's story to be heard in school?

3

An Angel Just Like Me

Alysia-Lara has written about the importance of recognizing yourself in the stories that are told in school. This chapter will focus on a project created by the education team of the Dioceses of Portsmouth and Winchester, which used the children's book, *An Angel Just Like Me,* by Mary Hoffman, to encourage pupils to think about the stereotypes in the Christmas story and ways to celebrate cultural diversity.[5] In part, this was a response to the 2019 report *From Lament to Action,* by the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce, which made it clear that institutional racism still exists in the Church of England and in its schools, calling for robust initiatives to change the culture of our schools and churches.[6]

Institutional racism is not about individuals being racist, so much as the structures and systems being weighted against people of a UKME/GMH background, making it much harder for them to flourish. This can be seen when children from different racial backgrounds do not see themselves reflected in the stories that are shared in class or the images shown in collective worship, or feel they have been reduced to a simple stereotype. Institutional racism is sometimes described as a culture of whiteness, a culture that assumes that white is normal and neutral and subconsciously sees anyone non-white as alien or exotic. White Christians sometimes claim that they are colour-blind, that they simply do not see race, thinking that this is a good thing, whereas in fact it leaves Black and Brown people feeling invisible and unheard.

Institutional racism is sometimes described as a culture of whiteness

Institutional racism continues to exist in the UK school system, including some Church of England schools. Countless reports show that pupils from a UKME/GMH background, particularly Black Caribbean boys, are more likely to leave school without meaningful qualifications (even when they start from the same baseline), are more likely to suffer from significant mental health problems and more likely to be excluded from school, with the associated risks of entering the criminal justice system.[7] The opposite can also be true, where pupils of colour feel pressurized to overachieve. The writer and presenter Jeffrey Boakye was a successful English teacher for many years, but describes how hard he had to work to be accepted by his (white) peers, as well as the questions his pupils asked, such as, 'Are you really a teacher?,'

'Can you rap, Sir?' and, 'Have you ever been to prison?'[8] The lived experience of pupils of colour and their families is that they often feel overlooked or stereotyped, as seen in Alysia-Lara's account of her own schooldays. This is where books can play a vital role in helping pupils of all racial backgrounds feel visible and valued.

From Lament to Action made clear that the Church of England had been talking about race for decades and that the time had come to stop lamenting and to take action. The report made 47 recommendations for the church and for CofE schools, covering areas such as the recruitment and retention of Black leaders, as well as creating resources for church services, youth groups and students to help them think through the issues around race. Diocesan education teams were tasked with creating curriculum and collective worship materials that would open up these conversations, so the team from the Dioceses of Portsmouth and Winchester created a project based on the popular children's book, *An Angel Just Like Me.*

The story tells how Tyler, an African-American boy, accidentally broke a Christmas tree ornament and tried to replace it with an angel that looked like him, rather than one with pink skin and yellow hair. However hard he looked, there were no Black angels to be found, which also led him to wonder why Father Christmas was always white and why the characters in the nativity story were always portrayed with pale skin 'when they lived in a hot country.' He is reassured that at least the magi have darker skin but is puzzled that all the other characters were represented as white Europeans. The book is now out of print but we were delighted that, when the author Mary Hoffman heard about our project, she recorded herself reading the story, complete with angel wings and a tinsel halo! The resources can all be found on the Dioceses of Portsmouth and Winchester websites and include materials for collective worship, Religious Education lessons and art activities.[9] These explore the stereotypes around the Christmas story, for example through investigating artwork from different cultures. The resources also unpack the Bible's teaching about people of all races being made in God's image and give pupils opportunities to discuss the idea of everyone having infinite value.

Children were uncertain what language to use

Schools across the two dioceses used the resources and the project was also widely taken up by local community schools and those in other dioceses. Feedback from teachers showed that using a children's book as a starting point made it much easier for pupils to start talking about potentially sensitive issues. One school reported that their children were uncertain what language to use, asking if it was 'OK to call someone Black?' and another class was worried that somehow it was not nice or polite to mention someone's race or skin colour. Conversa-

tions with teachers indicated that, for many, this was the first time they had discussed these issues openly in class. We found that many teachers were nervous about discussing race, worried that they might offend someone or cross a line, so starting with a children's book made it much easier to get the conversation started. It was interesting that, while pupils and teachers were very open to the idea that Jesus was not white and that everyone needs to be represented in the Christmas story, there was pushback from some adults in churches, including some clergy, who struggled with the idea of a Black Jesus or with telling children that God can look like them. This is despite clear biblical teaching that we are all made in God's image. While Jesus was born into a Middle Eastern, Jewish culture, it is just as valid for African, Asian or Latino/a Christians to portray him in their own image as it is for European Christians to paint him as white. As an aside, when explaining the concept of the 'image of God' to children, it is useful to explore the idea that this is not a physical image, so much as a moral one. God has given us qualities such as compassion and justice, which he also shares—and he expects us to live out these values in our interactions with others!

Although the book was first published in 1997, many of the issues it explores are just as relevant today. We found that it is still hard to find Christmas cards, Christmas ornaments or nativity sets that depict characters from different ethnic backgrounds. We challenged the pupils in our schools to keep their eyes open for racially-diverse angels and Christmas figures and, while some are available online, there are still very few culturally-diverse cards or decorations in the shops. Lots of schools went on to create their own artwork, creating angels and nativity scenes that depict different races, reflecting their local communities. Parents and carers were drawn into the debate and some schools took this much further, writing to Christmas card manufacturers and local shops asking them to produce and stock a wider range of cards and decorations. One class of six year olds even invited their local MP into school and explained to him why it was so important for children of all cultures to be represented at Christmas and asked for his help in promoting diversity.

Many schools created ethnically-diverse Christmas displays

Many schools created ethnically-diverse Christmas displays, some of which were showcased in their local churches, encouraging children to write about how their ideas had changed over the course of the project. One ten year old explained that, 'If angels existed, I think the colour of their skin could be any colour like brown, black or white. But not silly colours like green or red.' Another added that, 'I will take away that everybody should be treated the same, no matter the colour of their skin.' It is encouraging that children are

beginning to verbalize these views; there is something very powerful about them putting such ideas into words.

It was so heartening to see children being given a voice and learning that they could make a difference in the world, equipping them to be courageous advocates. Some schools responded to the project with practical measures such as: ensuring that each class had colouring pencils in realistic skin tones; reviewing their RE resources to ensure diversity; or auditing the books in the school library to make them more representative.[10] It is striking that one simple project could have such a wide-reaching impact and this underlines the importance of asking children to think critically about race and other issues at a formative age. It would be wrong to pretend that issues of racial justice can be solved with a single conversation or by one children's book, but this was a positive start to the debate.

Our project based on *An Angel Just Like Me* was very well received and has had a lasting impact on schools. Many teachers say they feel more confident talking about race with their pupils and have started to draw out the racial themes in other books they read in class. One teacher commented that rather than avoiding more controversial books, she now seeks out books that will generate interesting conversations and is looking at the characters and themes in her class library books in a new way. Many schools are now putting Black angels on their Christmas tree and ensuring that their Christmas cards and nativities are ethnically diverse.

However, a few schools challenged our choice of an older book by a white author, when there are so many up-to-date books available by young Black writers and artists. This led to our next project, *All Are Welcome,* which drew on a range of children's stories to start conversations and included more focused anti-racist training for teachers. The next chapter describes the *All Are Welcome* project in more detail.

Questions for Reflection

- Are you aware of stereotyped, white images associated with the Christmas story? Why do you think these are so prevalent?
- How do you respond to the idea of Jesus and the characters in the Christmas story being racially diverse?
- Why do you think this idea makes some people uncomfortable?

4

All Are Welcome

Children's books can be a great springboard for more challenging conversations in the classroom, providing a neutral, unthreatening starting point that engages pupils' minds and emotions. Teachers need to be wary of unthinkingly using typically white stories which may perpetuate the idea that white is neutral or normal. For example, many traditional children's books typically portray unicorns or blonde princesses as good, whilst dark-skinned witches or pirates are bad. This only reinforces racial stereotypes when children are at an impressionable age. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) does an annual review of new children's books, *Reflecting Realities*, and in 2017 they found that only 4% of books had a Black or Asian protagonist. This rose to 30% of children's books published in 2022, but UKME/GMH children are still far more likely to encounter an animal or an inanimate object as the hero, than a character which looks like them.[11] It is important for all schools to be aware of this imbalance and to promote stories that reflect different racial backgrounds, but this is especially true in CofE schools which are intentionally trying to ensure that every pupil flourishes and experiences life in all its fullness, as set out in the CofE *Vision for Education* and John 10.10.

Children are beginning to form racial ideas by the time they start school

Many parents and teachers believe that children simply do not notice colour; however, research shows that they are beginning to form racial ideas by the time they start school and that these are firmly engrained by nine and much harder to change after that age.[12] The stories we choose to tell our children play a key role in helping them to make sense of their own lives and of the communities around them. Choosing books with well-developed, three-dimensional Black characters gives pupils positive role models and helps to develop critical thinking skills. In UK schools, where white culture still dominates, it is crucial that pupils explore alternative narratives about racial identity and begin to create their own stories, rather than having ideas imposed on them. This does not just apply to UKME/GMH pupils; all children need to have their horizons broadened, learn empathy and develop meaningful relationships with people of other cultures. It is particularly important that largely monocultural schools begin to normalize ethnic diversity.

We wanted to build on the success of *An Angel Just Like Me* with a project based on stories that would appeal to younger children, combining this with some training on creating anti-racist classrooms. It is not enough for schools simply not to be racist; they need to be actively challenging the dominance of white culture and celebrating ethnic diversity in every area of school life. Schools often avoid talking about race as it can make people feel uncomfortable, whilst many teachers are anxious about saying the wrong thing. However, ignoring race does not make the problem go away—indeed, it can reinforce the idea that ethnicity is unimportant, rather than actively celebrating difference. This makes storybooks the ideal starting point, as most children enjoy a good story and they can open up new worlds and present different perspectives, not just during Black History Month or World Book Day, but throughout the year.

Our school communities are diminished if they pretend not to see race or claim that all pupils are the same. It is vital that teachers are equipped to handle questions of race sensitively and confidently. Unfortunately, the current political climate can make teachers afraid of giving offence or feel that they are taking sides in a culture war, which means that controversial subjects such as race and diversity are often glossed over, rather than difference being celebrated and affirmed. Often teachers do not have the language to talk about race, which makes them feel ill-equipped and uncomfortable, yet this makes it even more important that they are empowered to celebrate diversity in the classroom, address questions of social justice and enable all pupils to flourish. If we genuinely believe that every child is made in God's image and that diversity is part of God's original plan for creation, then there is an urgent need for teachers to be trained in how to handle sensitive subjects such as race in the classroom. It is easy to make the mistake of thinking that colour-blindness is politically correct, yet God is not colour-blind. If God did not see colour, then God would not see injustice or oppression, a view we know is unbiblical. It is important that all our children understand that God sees them for who they really are, not as some colourless, anonymous entity. Some adults claim that children are naturally colour-blind, but the truth is that we need to be raising colour-conscious children and teaching them how the world really works. For schools to be actively anti-racist, teachers need to see colour and their pupils need to see it too.

If God did not see colour, then God would not see injustice or oppression

The *All Are Welcome* project was designed to equip teachers to talk openly about race with younger children, using six children's books by a range of young, Black authors. In each book, children of different racial backgrounds can see themselves clearly represented and for each book there is a class reflection, some RE materials and suggested art activities. For example, the materials

based on the title book, *All Are Welcome*, by Alexandra Penfold, start by asking pupils to look at themselves in a mirror and think about the features they have which make them unique. The RE resources encourage them to discuss different ways to welcome strangers (for example, some cultures rub noses, bump fists, bow or clap) before considering the story of Jesus welcoming the children, then explore ways in which schools and churches can make other people feel more welcome. Many schools have embraced this book and often include it in displays in their entrance hall, thereby celebrating the fact that everyone is welcome in their school, regardless of their background or heritage.

Look Up!, by Nathan Bryon, introduces children to Rocket, a young girl who dreams of becoming an astronaut, and encourages them to think about their own hopes and dreams for the future. The resources compare her experiences with Maggie Aderin-Pocock, the award-winning astrophysicist, who was discouraged from becoming a scientist at school and says that sometimes she still gets mistaken for the cleaner because of her skin colour. She is committed to visiting schools and encouraging pupils (especially girls and young people from ethnic minorities) to engage with science. Her message is to always follow your dreams and reach for the stars: the resources encourage children to discuss why this might be harder for some people than others in a world that still judges people by their race. The collective worship materials associated with this book are based on Jer 29.11, encouraging pupils to have hopes and dreams for the future because God has good plans for each one of them.

One of the best things about the Rocket books is the way they normalize racial diversity. Rocket is a fully-developed character, who just happens to be Black; her race is not the most interesting thing about her. When choosing books to read with children, it is important to avoid tokenistic attempts to tick the diversity box. A book may have a Black or Brown child on the cover, but they may play a very minor role in the story. Equally, it is important that any children of colour are three-dimensional characters, who have agency in their own lives and are interesting in their own right, not just because of their skin colour. The Rocket books or the *Anna Hibiscus* series, by Atinuke, are good examples of books which are well-written and have well-rounded, believable characters that do not just perpetuate stereotypes about racially-minoritized children. Such books are affirming for children from UKME/GMH backgrounds, as they see themselves reflected in the stories, but also vitally important for children racialized as white, who need to see that racial diversity is normal and natural and part of God's infinitely diverse creation. All the *All Are Welcom*e resources are freely available on the Portsmouth and Winchester diocesan websites.[13]

Avoid tokenistic attempts to tick the diversity box

Questions for Reflection

- How would you answer someone who argues that colour-blindness is the best way to deal with racial diversity?
- Which children's books do you know, with strong, fully developed characters from different racial backgrounds? How could you use these to generate conversations about race and identity?
- How can we avoid making this a tick-box activity, *eg* just reading racially diverse books on World Book Day?

5 Telling New Stories

As children and young people engage with narratives from diverse cultures, they are equipped to tell new stories about themselves and the world they live in. Jesus knew this and often told tales about marginalized people, making them more visible and giving them new ways of seeing themselves. Some of his best loved parables include previously peripheral characters, who are now centre stage. The Samaritan was a member of a despised people group but is suddenly the main protagonist in one of the best-known Bible stories. Now there is a new narrative, where a Samaritan is praised for being the good guy. Jesus told stories where shepherds play a key role, rather than treating them as outcasts, and stories about parties where the poor and overlooked were invited as honoured guests. In another parable about parties, a son who has disgraced his family name, and should have been disinherited, is welcomed with open arms. Jesus knew the power of stories to rewrite people's views of the world and to show an alternative future.

Refugee Stories

The Dioceses of Winchester and Portsmouth encourage schools to engage with Holocaust Memorial Day and offer workshops for teachers to help them tackle a challenging subject in age-appropriate ways, particularly through children's books about welcoming strangers and refugees. Schools often use the story of Paddington to help pupils understand what it must be like to arrive in a strange country, not knowing anyone and having left everything familiar behind. Michael Bond drew on his childhood memories of seeing Kindertransport children arriving at Liverpool Street Station, when he described Paddington arriving in London with his suitcase and a luggage label round his neck. Children are encouraged to think about how they would help Paddington feel at home, such as giving him a marmalade sandwich, so he would feel loved, or a hot bath and a bed for the night. Theology happens every day in primary school classrooms as pupils interpret Christian teaching for themselves and apply it to everyday life.

One Year 1 class read *The Suitcase,* by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, a story about a strange animal who arrives one day looking 'dusty, tired, sad and frightened.' He is pulling a large suitcase, which he says contains a teacup, a table and chair and a wooden cabin with a view of the sea. The children had been

encouraged to bring their own special objects to school, either something that had special memories, or the one thing they would choose to take with them if they had to leave everything else behind. These were all put in a suitcase to be explored later. As they read the book together, five-year-old Yehor, who had recently joined the class from Ukraine, exclaimed:

> This story is like me! I am like the new creature! I had to leave my country, and I couldn't bring much with me either because of the war. I had to leave my house to be safe…I had to go underground through a small hole to stay safe and now I live here in England with my Mum and Grandma. I cry every night because I miss my Dad, who is fighting the war in Ukraine, but I have my picture book to look at each day.

He showed the other children the photos in his book and his teacher says that when she told him how brave he was and how lucky they were to have him in their class, he gave her a tight squeeze. Reading *The Suitcase* together helped unlock Yehor's story and has enabled him to start exploring a new story about his life in England with new school friends who value and welcome him.

As children from different cultural backgrounds see themselves reflected in the books that are shared in class, they begin to tell new stories about a world where they are visible, where they have a role to play and are not marginalized or excluded. Equally, children who are racialized as white begin to understand that the world is much richer and varied than they might have imagined and begin to have empathy for those whom they might otherwise have overlooked.

Chatting Faith

Another example of a story empowering a child to speak up in school came as a result of using such storybooks in a very different setting. The education team at the Dioceses of Winchester and Portsmouth has also developed a project called *Chatting Faith,* which is part of the Church of England's *Growing Faith* initiative. This is a simple tool to encourage Christian parents to explore faith with their children. It uses picture books to unlock conversations about faith and normalize discussions about what God is doing in people's lives and in the world around them. Families are given a pack of picture books, and parents/carers and children read a book together then follow a series of prompt cards to: i) chat about what they have read, ii) discuss what God might think about the issues raised by the book and then iii) chat to God about what they have been discussing. There are suggestions for Bible stories which could be linked to each book, but these are deliberately open-ended, allowing each family to develop the discussions in their own way. The aim is to normalize conversations about God, using stories as a natural starting point.

One of the books selected for *Chatting Faith* is *I Am Nefertiti,* by Anne-Marie Anang, where a young girl joins a music group and is told that her name is too complicated, so the teacher is going to shorten it to Nef. Every time she is called Nef, Nefertiti feels as if she is shrinking, until she finally finds the courage to tell the others how to say her name properly. Children and parents in one of our schools shared how the book had stimulated discussions about their names and why they had been chosen, and how names in the Bible often had special meanings. For example, Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter, because he saw his leadership qualities and named him 'The Rock,' another example of a new story being told. One boy of Nigerian heritage told us that he and his father had been talking about his name, JesuhOvie, which means 'Jesus is King' and how it was his job to be an ambassador for Jesus. He then explained that his teachers had been saying his name wrong but that the book had given him the confidence to clap out the syllables and teach the class how to say it properly, just like Nefertiti in the story. *I Am Nefertiti* empowered him to talk about his name and gave him a new story to tell, about how he had found the confidence to speak out in class and talk openly about his faith. Just as Nefertiti in the story learned to overcome the microaggressions that refused to see her as a real person, so JesuhOvie learned that he could speak out and be proud of his name, his heritage and his faith.

Stories like this show the power of children's books as a springboard for conversations about faith, as well as sensitive subjects such as race and identity. One of the strengths of the project has been the way it has given children a voice, as the stories have empowered them to talk about themselves in new ways and to relate their faith to everyday life.

Questions for Reflection

- Can you think of a time when hearing someone else's story has enabled you to create a fresh narrative about yourself or the world around you?
- Can you think of any other biblical characters who were given the chance to see their identities and futures in a very different way?
- Can you imagine using a children's book to help open up a conversation about race and identity? Which book would you use?

6

‘You Are God’s Story’

Ephesians 2.10 tells us that we are God’s handiwork or masterpiece, that we have unique value and that God has a purpose for each of our lives. The word ‘workmanship’ in Greek is *poiema,* the root of the English word ‘poem,’ which adds another layer of meaning to Paul’s teaching: we are poems, handwritten by God. *The Voice* version translates this as, ‘We are the product of his hand, Heaven’s poetry etched in our lives.’ It is not too great a leap from our being divine poems to our lives being stories, written by the divine storyteller. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God is ‘the author and finisher of our faith’ (Heb 12.2, NKJV), as if God is writing the next chapter in our lives, whilst the psalmist tells us that all our days were written in God’s book before one of them came to be (Ps 139.16). As we use children’s books to unlock young people’s self-belief and sense of purpose in life, so we are helping them to discover God’s storyline for their life and to tell new stories, to find hope and to reimagine the future.

Children’s books help them to discover God’s storyline for their life

Lucy Farfoot’s book, *In Our Hands,* tells of ‘The Dulling,’ where the colour gradually drains from the world, until people become more and more isolated and the adults forget how to laugh and enjoy life. Finally, one girl plants a seed of hope and a group of children work together to bring colour back into the world, restoring it to how it was meant to be. This is a great book for normalizing racial diversity, as the author is of dual Caribbean-English heritage, who talks about being a child in the 1980s and never seeing herself reflected in storybooks. The main character is mixed race, though that is incidental to the story; she is a lively, active character, not portrayed as a victim or a token figure.

A number of schools have used *In Our Hands* as a whole school project and it is a great way to introduce children to the idea of being agents of change, showing them that they can work together to make the world a better place. One school read the book and drew up a list of things that were in their hands to change. They responded with a gamechangers day, with a range of activities selected by the pupils, that included making cards for people in hospital, creating Easter baskets for the elderly, designing banners about plastic pollution in the seas, writing newspaper articles about homelessness and visiting the local preschool to read to younger children. The head teacher described

the atmosphere in school as 'electric' and praised the way the children collaborated together and their understanding of the impact they could have on the wider world. Children's books can be a great way to help them reimagine the future and to write new stories about their role as gamechangers.[14]

We have seen that people in every culture have made sense of their lives through stories. We use them to connect with one another, with new ideas and to write new futures. Jesus was the master storyteller; we are told that he always used tales or parables when he spoke to the crowds (Matt 13.34). He knew that stories would hold people's attention and challenge them. A final example of a book that has been used to challenge children about how they think of themselves is *The Christmas Star,* by Hilary Robinson, about a small, insignificant star who is chosen to light the stable where Jesus will be born. This is another story with ethnically-diverse angels and nativity figures. It gives a clear message that everyone, however unimportant they may appear, has a role to play, echoing the biblical perspective that people look at the outside, but God looks at the heart (1 Sam 16.7). *The Christmas Star* encourages children to reimagine the future and see themselves stepping into new roles and responsibilities, even if they feel they are often overlooked.

Clearly it will take a lot more than just using a few children's books to challenge the culture of whiteness in our schools. However, these ideas are a simple catalyst for conversations—with children about how they see the world, and with adults about their choice of books and resources. Many schools have used these initiatives as a springboard for other actions, such as an audit of their books and resources or a review of their policies and practices. There is always the danger of a single project being tokenistic yet, if this approach can gradually be woven into the fabric of the school, then it becomes a powerful way to counter institutional racism.

There is a clear biblical mandate for promoting racial diversity

It has been encouraging to see individual teachers developing their own anti-racist resources and gaining the confidence to discuss controversial issues in class. *From Lament to Action* recommends that dioceses offer schools training and resources to move them forward in this area. This needs to include the theological basis for celebrating cultural diversity, so that teachers and school leaders understand that it is not just the politically correct thing to do, but that there is a clear biblical mandate for promoting racial diversity. The two bookends of the Bible demonstrate this, through the Genesis story of God's original multicoloured, diverse creation and in the Revelation vision of all races and nations worshipping together when God's kingdom is finally established. As schools become more confident in talking about race and more secure in their understanding of the theological basis for this, so they will be able to support pupils in finding their voices and

believing that they can be agents of change. In so doing, every member of the school community is allowed to flourish and to discover new chapters in the story God is writing about their lives. The word 'gospel' or 'good news' can be translated as 'good story;' we have a good story to share with our children about their lives and their role in the world.

Questions for Reflection

- What does the idea of our lives being a poem or a story written by God mean to you?
- Can you think of any book that has encouraged you (or others) to be a gamechanger?
- How could you embed the biblical picture of cultural diversity in various areas of your school's life?'

Notes

1 C S Song, *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts: Story Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2011) p 6.

2 UKMH/GME stands for 'United Kingdom Minority Ethnic or Global Majority Heritage.' There is no perfect acronym to describe people from diverse backgrounds. Some prefer BAME (Black, Asian and Majority Ethnic) or simply Black—or racialized as Black—but the danger of all such terms is that they tend to lump people together, rather than seeing them as individuals. UKME/GMH is a useful shorthand and is what the Church of England uses in its publications.

3 C N Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story,* October 2009: Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie: 'The Danger of a Single Story' (accessed August 2024).

4 *Lit in Colour: Diversity in Literature in English Schools,* https://www.penguin.co.uk/search-results?q=Lit+in+Colour%3A+Diversity+in+Literature+in+English+-Schools+ (accessed October 2024).

5 M Hoffman, *An Angel Just Like Me* (London: Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2007).

6 The Church of England's Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce, *From Lament To Action* (London: Church of England, 2021).

7 For example: Commission on Young Lives Report, *All Together Now. Inclusion, Not Exclusion: Supporting All Young People to Succeed in School* (London: Oasis Charitable Trust, 2022) and Runnymede Trust, *England Civil Society Submission to United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* (London: Runnymede Trust, 2021).

8 J Boakye, *I Heard What You Said* (London: Picador, 2022).

9 *An Angel Just Like Me* resources, Project Booklets and Resources—Diocese of Winchester (anglican.org) https://www.winchester.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/An-Angel-Just-Like-Me-Christmas-Project-Booklet.pdf (accessed October 2024).

10 This should also include auditing Bible storybooks, as many of these still portray European characters.The Desmond Tutu *Children of God Storybook Bible* is a good example of a book where artists from around the world have been invited to draw on their own cultural heritage for the illustrations.

11 Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, *CLPE Reflecting Realities—Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2017–2022* (London: CLPE, 2022).

12 P Agarwal, *Wish We Knew What to Say* (London: Dialogue Books, 2020).

13 *All Are Welcome* resources: https://winchester.anglican.org/education-schools/resources-for-schools/all-are-welcome/ (accessed October 2024).

14 You can find more Gamechangers project resources at: https://winchester.anglican.org/?s=Gamechangers (accessed October 2024).

How can we foster racial inclusion and better education of children for life in our increasingly diverse society? This book is an eye-opener, offering helpful, practical advice on how stories and narratives can be used to enable all children to feel valued and heard, and to build children's (and adults') awareness and respect for those who are often left out by traditional imagery.

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