"We will travel together" Can we use picture books to support our understanding of Black autism?

Hadiza Kere Abdulrahman, Clare Lawrence, Clare Mahon, Sheine Peart asks whether we can use picture books to challenge the perceptions of the children we teach and – more – those of ourselves as teachers and as individuals.

I think we can all agree on the importance of children's picture books. Rich, engaging and creative, we know that they have the potential to create worlds that can be a positive and influential tool in our children's understanding. They demand of us an element of scrutiny and a critical eye, especially when introduced into our classrooms. What books do we include (and which do we leave out)? What do portrayals within our books tell us about our values and beliefs? Can we use our critical awareness of picture books to challenge the perceptions of the children we teach and – more – those of ourselves as teachers and as individuals?

Given these questions, a group of us in the Midlands has come together to start a mini project using illustrated picture books to explore the portrayal of autism in Black pupils. Our motivation is that we could find little information on supporting this group; indeed, we found that little research has been published on the lived experience of Black autistic children in our schools. Although nothing suggests that autism prevalence varies between racial or ethnic groups, the experience of autism for Black families may differ to that for families who are White (Ramclam et al., 2022). Perhaps the absence of the voice of Black autistic people may be due to the paucity of autistic Black researchers. Black researchers throughout academia are a minority (e.g., Doharty et al., 2021; Arday, 2017), and autistic researchers are only now beginning to gain deserved visibility (e.g., Martin, 2021). Autism researchers who are both Black and autistic are therefore a minority of almost invisible proportions.

Within our group there are those who are Black, who are autistic, and who are parents or family members of both Black and autistic people. Many of us identify as being in more than one of these descriptors - and we have determined as a group to bring both our varied lived expertise and our acknowledged 'ignorance' to the discussion, treating what we don't know as of the same value as what we (think we) do. We make our exploration in an environment of trust and respect for each other's perspectives and a commitment to ensure that same respect is overtly accorded to the groups and individuals this investigation represents.

'Black' is, we acknowledge, not a nationality, and the term cannot encapsulate the diverse experience of peoples, but we have chosen this term for its broad understanding across communities. Nor, we know, do all people accept the term 'autistic', and nor is the experience of autism shared as the same across different people. Given these complexities, we felt that we needed to start – like any good story – 'at the beginning': What do we know? How have our experiences formed our positions regarding race and autism? How attuned are we in our diversity to each other's identities, beliefs and opinions? Our exploration must, we feel, begin with us. One member has described our endeavour as a journey:

'We are on the bus. We will travel together, but we do not yet know where the bus will go, where it will stop and who else may get on. Our destination remains unclear, but I believe that this is a journey worth taking'.

Our starting point

From the very beginning we had some difficulty in finding a range of picture books featuring Black autistic characters, and even more difficulty defining and agreeing on what we felt was 'good' about them. There were too many overlapping and contradictory elements. As a result, we decided – again – to step back. To frame our initial discussions we used just three illustrations from one text, My Brother Charlie (Peete & Peete, 2016), illustrated by Shane W. Evans. We agreed that our approach would be to neither endorse nor criticise this book, but rather to use it as a prompt to widen our discussions.

The illustrations

Picture 1

In this illustration the child, Charlie, has been taken to the doctor by his mother for an autism assessment. In our conversation we celebrated that the doctor is portrayed as a Black woman. We discussed the experience of visiting a Black professional as a Black person, and how 'there is much that can be taken as read and doesn't need to be explained'. This sense of shared experience reduces the 'othering' that may occur in the identification of difference.

We discussed the various factors that might lead a parent to seek an autism diagnosis for their child, how many autistic behaviours may be misinterpreted as 'naughtiness' or may be put down to poor parenting. Specifically, we considered how a predominantly White medical and educational community may misinterpret Black autistic children's behaviour. We were interested in the underlying implication that the mother (who knows her child intimately) must take that child to a stranger for an 'expert' interpretation of that child.

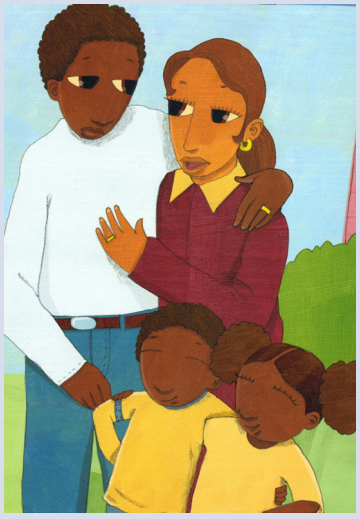
We could not fail, in this context, to comment on the use of a stethoscope to identify autism! We accept that it is a visual shortcut to identify the doctor, and this led to a wider discussion about representation: we know the doctor by her stethoscope and her white coat, but how do we identify the autistic child visibly when autism in invisible, and what do the illustrations of both Black characters and White characters in these books tell readers about societal attitudes?

In this illustration the two children – one autistic and one neurotypical – are positioned more as similar than as different, and neither is given preferential treatment. Clothing differences are subtle, and each child is illustrated as equally engaged. We discussed the importance of this portrayal and how it may run counter to more stereotypical perception of autism. We particularly liked the feeling of familial acceptance, the perspective that Charlie is a brother first, and that his autistic identity does not consume his other identities. We know that autism cannot be 'seen' – there is no one set of specific, exclusive behaviours that identify autism – but we recognise the common perception that an autistic person may avoid eye contact. Evans' illustration of Charlie avoids and therefore challenges this stereotype. The portrayal of the characters as Black was also praised by members of our group. The illustrations avoid the patronising approach of a generic child-character who has merely had their skin-colour darkened. In this example, the depiction of the children's hair was particularly approved.

Picture 2

We identified this illustration as being of interest because of the presence of the father. Too often, we felt, errant behaviour of Black children – especially within dominantly White societies – is blamed on the lack of a strong father-figure. There is a perception in some schools that the Black father may be missing, either actually absent or not taking a positive and full parental role within the family. It is notable in this picture that the father is not just there but is portrayed as sharing equal importance with the mother and, indeed, that the two are married: the wedding rings of both parents are prominently displayed.

We were interested in the paler representation of the mother, and the implication that this might hold for readers. The mother in the illustration is portrayed as lighter-skinned than her husband or either of her children, and her hair texture is 'smoother'. This led to discussion of the debate within Black communities regarding colourism and relative status.



Picture 3

Discussion

We took our initial ideas and comments and used them to 'dig deeper' into the themes we felt were emerging. These fell, we felt, into three topics: Who is the expert?, What does it look like? and Mothers and fathers: perceptions and portrayals.

Who is the expert?

Despite acceptance that parents know their children far more intimately than any professional, there remains an attitude that a child who appears 'different' should be assessed by a medical expert in order to identify an explanation. There may be an element in this of justification; some parents from Black communities

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report that teachers and other educational professionals misinterpret autism as a behavioural issue, citing 'an assumption that [B]lack boys are badly behaved' (Slade, 2014, p.8).

It has been recognised for many years that having a white doctor may impact negatively on the experience of Black patients (e.g., Levy, 1985), and that predominant societal norms regarding 'diagnosis' may be imposed on cultures who may prefer a wider familial acceptance model to that of labelling (Bailey & Arciuli, 2020; Lilley et al., 2019). Parents from within UK Black communities have expressed concern that their cultural, ethnic and religious sensitivities may not be understood by, or may be ignored by, non-Black professionals, both in medicine and in education (Kandeh et al., 2020). Parental report forms a crucial element in autism diagnosis (e.g., Skuse et al., 2004), yet standardised tests may not be sensitive to cultural differences (Beaton et al., 2000). Greater awareness of and sensitivity to these issues is needed; it remains likely that many Black families will be seen by White doctors regarding their child's autism assessments, and that many Black autistic children will be taught by White, neuro-typical teachers.

What does it look like?

We believe that portrayals of Black characters in picture books matter, and that it is important to scrutinise and understand how messages about race are communicated (Bostic, 2022). The illustrator for My Brother Charlie, Shane W. Evans, is a Black artist with sophisticated awareness of race and the portrayal of colour through illustrations. His choice to portray the character of the mother as lighter skinned is echoed in his similar portrayal made the following year in Chocolate Me! (Diggs, 2011), a book more overtly concerned with race and racism. Similarly, his choice to portray the mother's hair in My Brother Charlie as straight is clearly conscious; in Chocolate Me! The Black character's hair (which is illustrated in a way similar to that given to Charlie) is described as 'so poofy and big, like a wig. Not straight' (Diggs, 2011, n.p.). Colourism – prejudice and discrimination based on skin colour (Craddock et al., 2018) and phenotypes such as eye colour and shape, hair texture and nose shape (Phoenix & Craddock, 2022) – is an important health and social justice issue for People of Colour globally (Dixon & Telles, 2017). It can occur both within and between racialised groups (Hunter, 2007), so that the decision to portray the mother as having closer proximity to Whiteness (Reece, 2019) requires a level of critical dialogue for both White and Black readers.

Portrayals of autism also require consideration:

Autism is not a set of behaviours … on one level we all KNOW that it can't be - otherwise an identification would be so simple. And yet we are continually faced with 'traits', 'characteristics' and the like. Yes, there are all sorts of behaviours often associated with being autistic but none of them is universal and certainly none of them is exclusive.
Dr Luke Beardon, 2019, private correspondence.

This leaves an illustrator tasked with representing an autistic character in a picture book with a dichotomy: should the autism be 'shown' or not? Certain behaviours may be foregrounded, often negative ones of isolation or distress. Even more 'neutral' behaviours require scrutiny. For example, portrayal of autism through lack of eye-contact may be chosen as reduced eye-contact in autistic people is common (Cherry, 2021). However, although many autistic people do find eye contact intrusive and even painful (Trevisan et al., 2017), not all autistic people will present with altered eye-gaze, and eye-contact may vary between different individuals and at different times. Equally, in some cultures, avoidance of eye-contact is the cultural norm and lack of understanding of this may lead to misdiagnosis of autism (Lilley et al., 2019). As understanding of autism presentation across different groups – in children, in adults, in women and in the older population as well as across cultures – expands, it is important that more sophisticated perceptions of differing autism presentation is accepted and understood (Seers & Hogg, 2021).

Mothers and fathers: perspectives and portrayals

It is interesting that it is the mother who is shown taking Charlie to the doctor for diagnosis, as it may be that mothers are particularly sensitively attuned to autism indications in their children (Kishore & Basu, 2011). For Black mothers there may be additional motivation. Holly Robinson Peete, the writer of My Brother Charlie, articulates in a later publication that as the mother of a black son, her anxieties about her son's autistic behaviours are compounded because society perceives Black males as threatening (Peete et al., 2016). The diagnosis may help in some sense to protect a Black male through a societal primary identification as 'autistic' rather than as 'Black'. However, evidence suggests that the diagnosis may not provide protection for some Black children, where it can be 'hard to convince schools, even following a diagnosis, that autism [is] the cause of behaviour (Slade, 2014 p.8).

Conclusions

These three 'snapshot' pictures provided us with, we feel, a wealth of considerations around race and autism which help to raise issues of awareness in the classroom. Through them we have been able to interrogate our own ignorance around differing lived experience as White or Black, autistic or not, and around our differing teaching and parenting experiences. True, we have been left with more questions than answers - but we hold to the belief that knowledge and understanding come best to those who are open to looking for them. We know that we do not know enough yet, but we are starting to know what we do not know, and perhaps (we hope) there is enough in that to carry us forward on our journey.

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References can be viewed here.