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## **Exploring the representation of Black autistic people in children's picture books**

Children's books containing Black autistic characters are rare. As Bishop (1990) explains, books offer windows into others' experiences and act as mirrors for the way people see themselves. Whilst White, neurotypical children have different versions of themselves represented in fiction, the underrepresentation of Black autistic characters in children's fiction means that Black autistic people see themselves but poorly reflected.

Our research explores the representations of Black autistic characters in children's picture books. We sampled four books, exploring the representation of the characters' experience of being Black and autistic. The research team comprises five researchers. In line with their respective fields of expertise, two researchers analysed each book's representation of race and two further researchers approached each book by examining the representation of autism. A further researcher was tasked with drawing the two representations together.

### *Representations of Being Black in Children's Literature*

Some representations used visual imagery to affirm the existence of happy, secure Black children in unproblematic ways. Another book spoke to the Black community and reinforced the messages of family and the need to care for siblings. Whilst these ideas are not unique to the Black community, when Black people have often found themselves in the minority, there is a need for strong family support (Cross, Taylor, & Chatters, 2018). Two of the books represented the main characters as adventurous, excitable and testing boundaries. However, this was presented within the context of exploration, avoiding representing the child as disruptive and any potential subsequent links to criminality, another commonly held stereotype of the Black community (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

Whilst the books did attempt to challenge stereotypes, there were concerns around the portrayal of the Black characters' visual characteristics. In more than one book the characters, regardless of ethnicity, looked the same. A researcher suggested that the Black characters looked as if they had originally been White characters who had been coloured in black.

There were also concerns about voice. In one book, the main character appeared to be denied agency in creating their own solutions. Their voice was absent and they were dependent on the beneficence of others.

### *Representations of Autism*

In one book, the representation of autism was positive and affirming. It was not explicitly stated that the main character was autistic but implied through the character's [self-stimulating behaviour](#) (National Autistic Society, 2022). The book's message was one of inclusivity. Another book represented autism in a similarly positive manner, drawing on the main character's interest in animals, depicting this interest as contributing to imaginative play with another child, positioning their autism as a strength.

There were, however, issues with voice. In one book, the central character was positioned as strange and 'other' implying that, rather than being an effective mirror for children to see themselves represented, it was a window into autism for neurotypical people.

Another book only celebrated the central character once they were able to 'overcome' their autism and display neurotypical behaviours. The book also approached autism from a deficit perspective when a doctor diagnosed the central character with autism and pronounced limits on the child's future. The book itself was written from the perspective of a sibling, lacking a distinct and authentic autistic voice.

### *Intersectionality of Representations of Being Black and Autistic*

Some books framed the main characters' experience of being Black and autistic positively in an attempt to overcome stereotypes and provide effective mirrors for Black autistic children. Some tried to embrace and celebrate difference, whilst others saw this difference as limiting. Across all texts, there appeared to be a distinct lack of the Black autistic characters' voices. Researchers agreed that the messages of inclusion could have been significantly improved by giving the characters voice and agency, so that the books were effective mirrors for Black autistic children. When children's books containing a Black autistic character are so rare, it raises questions about how Black autistic children see themselves and how individuals can be supported by educators in developing their own identities.

### References

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