

# Role Play to Role Models

*How inclusive is your classroom?*

It is often the smallest details that make the biggest difference. Kim Foster examines the sometimes-forgotten ways in which we can introduce more diversity and inclusion into our classrooms.

**D**uring the first lockdown, my daughter changed her television viewing preference from one terrestrial channel to another. Inconsequential in lots of ways, but it did lead me to acknowledge one significant difference: the newer choice had many more characters who had special educational needs (SEN). Not only that, but they were the main or leading

character in some programmes, engaged fully in life and in adventures.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission defines equality as everyone being able to “make the most of their lives and talents”. As teachers, in order to do this, we need to facilitate opportunities to value and respect everyone. We should celebrate differences as well as similarities.

We can do this in multiple ways, both consciously and unconsciously. We model not only our own values, but those we



BIO 

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feel are important in the wider sense. We endeavor to ensure equal treatment of all young people through our own actions – modelling, enforcement of morals and school policies and in our responses to children’s reactions to their peers. We also have a responsibility to uphold the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), many of which relate to these values, processes and beliefs.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN THE CLASSROOM?

In classroom practice, we need to consider not only the human aspect of contact and connections but also the role models we create, perhaps unconsciously, through the resources in our classrooms. It is important to be mindful of the use of displays in class and around school, signs and labels and text and book choices, in addition to representation through toys and role play equipment. These are part of the reasonable adjustments that schools should make. Not providing such resources could be deemed to be discriminatory against pupils and families regarding the protective characteristics of the 2010 Equality Act.

When considering literature, we need to

take into account the breadth and diversity of characters in books, whether a range of needs and experiences are reflected in our book corners and whether they are realistic. We also need to include (and model) a diverse range of representations of gender, race and ethnicity in our resourcing and curriculum content in order to encourage discussion, understanding and acceptance. This may have greater significance in a school that has a more limited diversity in its catchment area, such as a mono cultural setting.

In terms of books and text resources, Pennell et al (2017:417) identify these reflection questions in their discussion around representation of disability in children’s literature:

- Can readers across the ability/disability continuum find books that mirror their own lives in meaningful and authentic ways?
- Do some books provide windows for typically developing students to begin to understand diverse abilities?
- Are all children represented?

Their research found a limited range of books representing children with disabilities, and when such characters were present, they

were often more of a teaching tool to help those children without special needs learn about the need itself rather than adventures or stories based on these characters.

Discussion following a research project around children interacting with play figures with additional physical needs, undertaken by Goldsmith University and the Science Museum London in 2016, generated some interesting responses from children. Use of toys to enable discussion in a familiar context is recognised, with Jones (2016) stressing that if such resources are not available, these opportunities are gone.

There is growing momentum for toy manufacturers to represent a greater variety of needs in their toys. The #toylkeme campaign, started in 2015, aims to encourage manufacturers to create toys that represent a wider range of children’s needs. They created a photo campaign using toys to highlight their ambitions – Toy box Tales.



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## THINKING ABOUT WHAT WE SAY

In all these aspects, we must also consider our use of language. For example, research led by Seitz et al (2020) into use of language relating to gender and its impact on gender stereotypes found that the use of adjectives to describe male/ female attributes can in itself create or reinforce stereotypes e.g. strong man, pretty lady. We must also factor the role of person-centered language. By using such language, we are recognising the person first and the need second. As Briggs (2016) acknowledges, the language we use has an impact on people, and on how they are perceived. Person-centered language builds confidence and identity, in addition to acknowledging that there are many other aspects to that person's character.

Using such language applies the social model approach coined by Oliver (1963) in recognising that the environmental factors around a young person may well be their barriers to learning, and not themselves.

Auditing and considering resources against a range of factors can help to reduce those barriers for young people; both for children and young people with additional needs, and in terms of possible misconceptions and lack of knowledge for those without. As psychologist Sian Jones says, "if we do want to change the status quo in our society – we know that acceptance of prejudice and inequality doesn't magically appear at 18 years of age".

As teachers, we play a role in helping children to develop awareness, compassion and empathy and as schools, we have a requirement to "foster good relations between pupils, advance equality of opportunity and eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation." (Equality Act 2014). Classroom resources can be an important, but sometimes under considered, part of our toolkit.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- Are you considering the role models and representations you are using in your teaching? (For example, are you using images of a range of family groupings? Do you have dolls and figures of different genders and ethnicities in role play resources?)
- Are you challenging stereotypes? (For example, through your use of texts for literacy). Your local school library service will be able to help you select books for your school or class library space to ensure a diverse selection.
- Are you allowing time for children to discuss and debate their views and experiences? Circle time or Philosophy for Children (P4C) are good approaches for this.
- How do you use assemblies and other opportunities to consider role models and alternative significant people- how diverse is your provision?

