

# The effect of 'The Colour of Home' on teaching and learning about diversity in the Primary School

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This dissertation has been inspired by my specialism in Geography in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick under the supervision of Dr. Anne M. Dolan. My experience in school was very positive and perhaps this has guided me towards my current career path in primary education. Diversity wasn't something that was distinguishable among my friends and me. In the eyes of a twelve-year-old, we were all the same. This is not the case in all classrooms, however. Being from Portlaoise, I quickly grew accustomed to the ever-growing diversity in our society. I found that when I began to work in rural primary schools the student population was very rarely reflective of this growing diversity. I wanted to create a piece of work that might guide student teachers and qualified teachers towards a more effective means of incorporating intercultural education into the curriculum.

**KEYWORDS:** Diversity, Primary Education, Resources, The Colour of Home

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to investigate the effect of 'The Colour of Home' (Hoffman 2002) on teaching and learning about diversity in the primary school classroom. Throughout this research a series of questions will be through both empirical investigation and external sources and publications.

Embedded throughout this article it is hoped to achieve the reasons for which 'The Colour of Home' provides a positive and/ or negative stimulus for teaching about diversity among teachers and student teachers alike. Consequently, this research will endeavour to

ascertain the extent to which this picture book meets the appropriate learning objectives in teaching about diversity in Geography. This research was conducted through personal reflection alongside interviews and surveys. It is also aimed to identify additional effective strategies or methodologies in teaching about diversity that may supplement this picture book or substitute its use. Given the extensive research surrounding the employment of picture books in the classroom, and teaching about diversity, the article aims to clarify the best practices for optimal teaching and learning of diversity with and without 'The Colour of Home.' The purpose in writing this article is to set out a more effective means of teaching intercultural education throughout the curriculum.

## CONTEXT

The context of this research derives from a personal motivation, albeit remaining within the theme of education. Diversity did not feature in my primary school setting. Hence, my fascination with this picture book was established at a later stage in my education, namely in Mary Immaculate College as an undergraduate student. While this is suggestive of the universal and accessible nature of picture books, given the timeframe from which my fascination with picture books peaked, it suggests a powerful resonance within 'The Colour of Home.' What is ordinarily perceived as a stimulus within an early years or primary school setting had suddenly gripped the interests of a twenty-year-old undergraduate student. 'The Colour of Home' explores the world of a refugee boy named Hassan who travels from Somalia to England where he encounters cultural barriers and challenges. The discussion that followed from our reading disclosed the value of this picture book in discussing intercultural issues that are faced in many classrooms today. If this impact could be experienced among third level undergraduates, its effectiveness could be magnified in the primary school setting. This book is not simply tickled with whispers of diversity; it whole heartedly explores the harrowing brutalities in the modern world, and it remains relevant to primary school children. My genuine curiosity in this area has broadened my desire to gauge the effectiveness of 'The Colour of Home' and explore the most effective means of teaching about diversity for optimal learning in the primary school setting. Given my pre-established interest in Geography and the sociological disrupt faced in modern times, I sought to explore a research topic that was relevant to education, and which was simply linked to a sociological theme. The trying times faced by the African American citizens of the USA in relation to issues of racial equality set the backdrop for my research proposal and hence I decided to explore diversity through 'The Colour of Home' in the primary school classroom.

My reason for writing this article also stems from my experience of teaching in the classroom. My own sentiments towards teaching about diversity greatly affected my ability to teach this topic prior to researching this area. I found that I was uncomfortable discussing diversity as I didn't want to 'step on anyone's toes.' I was worried that I might say the wrong thing or perhaps that I wouldn't do justice to the theme of diversity. I can specifically recall teaching a lesson based on diversity whereby I asked the children to draw a picture of themselves that would reflect everything about them: hair colour, skin colour, eye colour, interests and much more. One little girl drew a picture of herself but did not acknowledge that she did not have white skin. I was uncertain as to whether I should approach this little girl about the picture or if I should ignore it. Given my lack of training in this area I chose to ignore the situation that had occurred. I was so unsure if I had done the right thing, so I approached my peers about the situation, and they too were unsure. Given my feelings towards this I realised that our training in intercultural education is lacking. While we had learned of the discrimination and inequality within our education system, we had not learned how to tackle these problems as teachers. I was unsure whether discussing this area of education could be considered 'taboo' and I felt extremely uncomfortable in the classroom as a result. Having researched more about this topic I have come to understand that these uncomfortable conversations must be had. This research has helped me to shape my understanding of intercultural education and how best to teach it. My hope is that it can help other teachers too.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employed interviews and surveys as a source of data collection, alongside my own personal reflective journal. Adopting these collection instruments saw me interviewing six participants and surveying ten other participants. It is important to note that I interviewed the author of this book, Mary Hoffman, to fully encompass the aims of this picture book in relation to intercultural education. Hoffman's interview served as a 'landmark' feature in this article. I felt that interviews were more conducive as they allowed for the natural flow of the discussion to give a deeper understanding of that which was being examined (Krauss 2005).

Both purposive and convenience sampling were employed. This particular research topic requires a specific knowledge that is relevant to the research title. Given the specificities of this study, purposive sampling was required to review the research question (Ames et al. 2019). Such sampling was combined with convenience sampling in identifying student teachers that employed the use of 'The Colour of Home' on their final school placements about

the teaching of diversity. The sample was identified via two coinciding means whereby they were chosen from the same field of work as myself while they simultaneously had a deep and genuine knowledge of the research title in order to give their informed opinions on this research.

In order to meet ethical approval, I declared my intentions to the Ethics Committee where approval was granted. Consent is vital in any research study so as to inform the participants that they are, in fact, participants of a research study (BERA 2018). The data received was stored on a computer file that was secured by password in a secure location and maintains the anonymity of the participants involved (BERA 2018). I felt it best to explore “multiple perceptions on a single reality” within this study which thereby saw me using a peer-debriefing system to check against any errors or biases to ensure research reliability (Golafshani 2003, p.603). Qualitative Content Analysis was employed in this research topic. Themes and categories flowed from the data received.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### DISCUSSION AND INTEGRATION OF DIVERSITY

While the purpose of this book, ‘The Colour of Home’, is not expressly concerned with teaching about diversity, it was noted by participants as being a useful resource for approaching intercultural education in the classroom. Survey findings found that all respondents would recommend ‘The Colour of Home’ in teaching about diversity. Participant One notes that ‘The Colour of Home’ *“provides an excellent stimulus for discussion and provides a base for using and integrating the topic of diversity into a number of subject areas.”* Quast and Bazemore-Bertrand (2019) also note the importance of discussion when coming to terms with uncomfortable or challenging themes within the area of diversity or in intercultural education in order to develop a thorough understanding. This resonates with Participant three’s response as they explain that *“it is also a picture book that can be easily integrated with other curricular areas e.g., geography.”* The Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999) highlights the underpinning importance of curricular integration as a key principle of learning. The Primary Curriculum explains that integration of learning *“gives children’s learning a broader and richer perspective, emphasises the interconnectedness of knowledge and ideas and reinforces the*

*learning process*” (Government of Ireland 1999 p. 16). This suggests that ‘The Colour of Home’ presents opportunities for broader and richer perspectives surrounding diversity.

#### DEVELOPING LINKS

Participant two equally values ‘The Colour of Home’ as a tool for teaching about diversity. They explain that *“the children were very invested in the story and could make meaningful links between their life and the life of the characters.”* Developing links is suggestive that the children in this classroom experience diversity in their own lives. Lynch and Baker (2005) express the vitality of learning through experience in order to develop fruitful understanding and tolerance among teachers and students alike.

#### TOLERANCE, EMPATHY, AND A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In an interview with (Hope 2016), Hoffman explains that the purpose for writing her book ‘The Colour of Home’ is to foster tolerance towards everyone living in our country. Her aim is to develop empathy and dispel negative attitudes towards other people and simultaneously make the reader aware of stereotypes in the society to which refugees flee (Hope 2016). These objectives will serve as a good comparison into the effect of this book on teaching and learning about diversity and whether teachers feel they can meet such objectives. When I asked Hoffman what she would like the reader to take from her book she simply desired a *“broadening of their imagination.”* She also referred to empathy as she explains that *“no-one who can imagine themselves into the shoes of an asylum-seeker or rough sleeper...could ever be heartless or mean to them.”* The tone of this statement suggests that she wants her reader to imagine themselves in Hassan’s situation and she encourages an empathetic viewpoint towards him.

Participant two noted that *“[‘The Colour of Home’] allows the children to physically see into another person’s world to develop empathy.”* This calls to mind the idea of Bishop (1990) who notes that picture books provide a window or mirror into another person’s world. This is so important given the growing need for culturally responsive teaching. Lynch and Baker (2005) suggest that the only way to learn about diversity is to experience it in the classroom. Baker et. al (2004) explain that, for children, education is life; thus, implying that learning about diversity through Hassan’s story is an experience for the children that will help to prepare them for active citizenship (Dolan 2014). Participant ten acknowledges that the student’s in their class learn about *“diversity from another perspective”* while Participant nine notes that *“it allowed them to explore life*

*from a different perspective.*” Participant three noted that the story developed empathy among the students while simultaneously developing tolerance amongst them:

The positives that arose from this lesson were that the pupils empathised with the character when they saw what had happened and how different life was in England compared to Somalia. They understood how difficult Hassan found it to adjust to life in England because it was so different to what he was used to. The pupils also saw the positive impact that kindness and understanding had on Hassan’s experience of school

#### CELEBRATING DIVERSITY AND ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES

Most of the participants acknowledged that they would use other picture books to coincide with ‘The Colour of Home’ as it would open up more discussion in the classroom and provide more experience with diversity from other perspectives. This again reflects Bishop’s (1990) idea of picture books as windows into another world. Interestingly, Participant seven noted the idea of taking a whole-school approach to *“celebrate difference among all of the children and staff.”* This participant noted that the children should *“share some of their traditional food and cultural traditions such as dance and literature.”* This celebration of difference, rather than ignorance of difference, is an important issue noted by Lynch and Baker (2005). Participant three noted that they would *“integrate the picture book with areas such as SPHE and Art, as some pupils may be best able to express themselves through pictures, just as Hassan did in the story.”* This integration technique is a positive strategy in teaching about diversity and was mentioned by several other participants. Participant two notes that they would use *“visuals and songs”* to teach diversity. This finding is particularly effective as music is noted as a learning strategy that emphasizes conceptual understanding (Morgan et. al 2015). Both participant six and eight noted *“project-based work”* as a strategy that might enhance the teaching and learning of diversity in the classroom. This strategy would allow the children to take what they have learned and develop their understanding.

This picture book has been found to develop empathy in students as they gain an insight into Hassan’s perspective. Discussion provokes feelings of empathy among the children and aims to broaden their imagination. Findings suggest that these objectives have been successfully achieved from Junior Infants to sixth class. This picture book gives a new experience to the children from the perspective of a refugee. This new perspective allows for the development of empathy. Findings also suggest that student teachers and teachers alike struggle with their confidence in teaching diversity in the classroom

## **CONCLUSION**

From the findings of this research, it has been concluded that 'The Colour of Home' provides an overall positive stimulus for teaching and learning about diversity in the classroom. The findings point to opportunities for great discussion following the reading of this book. Discussion is noted by Quast and Bazemore-Bertrand (2019) as being vital in the understanding of different themes, including diversity. McIntosh (1989) notes that positive representation of white people in media and literature is a taken-for-granted privilege. She highlighted the lack of representation of diverse cultures, ethnicities and races and the crying need for discussion towards active citizenship. This lack of representation, particularly in education, is noted by Lynch and Baker (2005) who recommend a formal education about diversity in school. In an interview with Hope (2016), Hoffman notes that the development of tolerance and empathy are the key objectives of writing this book. The participants of this study confirmed that such tolerance and empathy was fostered among the students in their own classrooms. Hope (2016, p.311) also notes that the children in the classroom developed a "powerful empathy" towards diversity. In developing empathy and tolerance, the students are preparing for active citizenship in a globalized society (Dolan 2014).

Many strategies have been noted by the participants of this research as a means of supplementing the use of 'The Colour of Home.' Many suggested the use of other picture books and pieces of literature as a method of supplementation. This would help with the issue of representation among minoritized groups as it gives greater potential to increase the experience of diversity, in an equitable way, in the classroom. Other participants encouraged the celebration of diversity in the classroom by hosting an intercultural event whereby the children can share their cultural traditions. The use of integration has been noted as being an excellent methodology in teaching about diversity; this is very much in keeping with the aforementioned statement in the curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999). Music has been confirmed as an informal education that fosters the child's conceptual knowledge (Morgan et. al 2015). Finally, games arose as an effective strategy among the participants. From the findings of this research study, it is evident that 'The Colour of Home' has a positive effect on teaching and learning about diversity in the primary school classroom.

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