

# How can we improve representation in the classroom?

**Claire Seeley talks to Laura Henry-Allain MBE about representation in the classroom, how teachers can promote anti-racism and work towards creating a core curriculum that authentically represents all people**



Figure 2 Laura with her Gran



Figure 1 Laura Henry-Allain whose characters inspired *JoJo & Gran Gran*

**O**n 25 May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis, USA. His death sparked mass activism across the world and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. This has sparked an important dialogue within the educational community. We are challenged to think about experiences of racism suffered by people every day. As educators, we are challenged to examine our practice. Are we doing enough? Do we inadvertently promote dominant representations that create barriers to learning within our own classrooms?

Over the last two years, I have been working as an educational consultant with Laura Henry-Allain MBE on the BBC television CBeebies series, *JoJo & Gran Gran*. The show features an animated black British family – the first in the UK. The series was created by

CBeebies but inspired by the characters in Laura's books. Laura is an award-winning global early-years consultant, scriptwriter and speaker and is an associate producer on the show. Laura and I took some time out to reflect on the success of series one and the importance of promoting diversity and representation in education.

## Our conversation

**C: Laura, can you tell us about the journey from writing the books to the commissioning of *JoJo & Gran Gran*?**

**L:** I first wrote the books when my grandmother passed away 12 years ago. Initially, they were self-published. Then three years ago, the development team at CBeebies created *JoJo & Gran Gran*, inspired by my characters. So, it has been a 10-year journey.

**C: Why do you think *JoJo & Gran Gran* has gone down so well with CBeebies audiences?**

**L:** I think there are a number of different things. It's the inter-generational relationship between a grandmother and her granddaughter that's relatable. Wherever you are in the world, you have that special relationship between a grandparent and their grandchild. Just after the show came out, we went into lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I feel on an emotional level that there were many grandchildren unable to see their grandparents, so there was an emotional connection there.

However, I think number one, the most positive thing, is it's the first black British animation in the UK. I think from that point of view it is to be celebrated, not just for black children to see themselves on television but for other children as well. It's equally important for white children to see diversity on television and for children and families to see positive role models on the screen, because at times we still see a number of stereotypes that show black people in negative situations.

Key words: ■ Representation ■ Diversity ■ Anti-racism

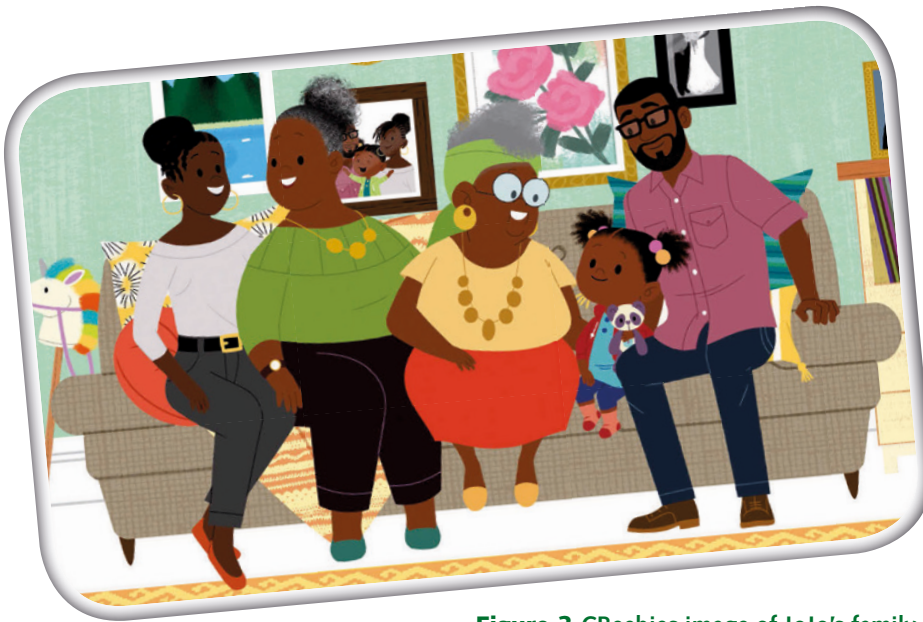


Figure 3 CBeebies image of JoJo's family

**C: Love is also a central theme in JoJo & Gran Gran isn't it?**

**L:** Yes absolutely, love is the main thing. The love that my grandmother showed her grandchildren, making sure that this was central, right the way through, is something that the whole production team were equally passionate about. My grandmother would just be super delighted.

**C: I think that we have all been really conscious, haven't we, about creating belonging in the show. I wanted to explore how we could push this into our classrooms. What is the value of representation to you and what impact do you think it has on learners?**

**L:** I think it is super important that we all have a sense of belonging. It's important that every child has that sense of identity, that every child is able to speak passionately about their family and heritage.

A few years ago, I was doing an author visit in a school. I bring props with me – in the original first *JoJo & Gran Gran* book they go to the market, so I take, as an example, weighing scales, mangoes, apples, and this brings the story alive. After I finished reading the book in the reception class in the morning, I said to the children, 'Mrs Henry has to go and see your other friends in their classes and I need to share the book with them'. A little boy said, 'Aw, please stay Mrs Henry!' I said, 'I'll come back, but what I would like you to do is to write or draw what special treats you think Gran Gran brought JoJo'. He said, 'I'll write for you Mrs Henry, I'll write for you'.

Returning in the afternoon, I found him outside in the den area. He ran back into the classroom, calling 'Come with me, come with me, Mrs Henry'. He showed me what he had written, and his teacher told me that was the first time this child had done any form of free writing. This was the most exciting moment of my visit, especially because he used English as an additional language. He made that connection, seeing people like him in the book. That's why he wrote the list of the special treats that Gran Gran had brought JoJo. It's all about making connections with children so it makes sense to them and empowers them.

**C: I was thinking about books I read when I grew up. I read about people like Pippi Longstocking, Heidi, and the Worst Witch with her stripy tights. While they didn't quite mirror my world, I could see little bits of myself in them. When we think about representation, you have to really work hard to find diversity in storybooks.**

**L:** The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education research states that 'in 2019, 33.5% of the school population [in England] were of minority ethnic origins. In stark contrast, only 5% of children's books had an ethnic minority main character' (CLPE, 2020: 6). In fact, children from a minority ethnic background are more likely to see an animal main character than someone who looks like them in a storybook (Flood, 2020). The murder of George Floyd was awful; it was shocking. As a result, the Black Lives Matter movement continued to develop on a global level from

early roots many years ago. We now have people willing to change, willing to embrace, willing to have more representations in terms of publishing and sector brands and television, so this is really positive.

**C: And so overdue.**

**L:** Absolutely.

**C: It's huge, it's really significant. So, what could teachers be doing in their classrooms? What about teachers working in predominantly white schools?**

**L:** When a school or an early-years setting has 100% white pupils, it is even more important to take care to represent all sections of the community. Diversity is even more important for children who don't see diversity within their community. Isn't it wonderful when children see positive representation of black people doing normal things, whether it's on television or in books?

**C: How can teachers better weave diversity into their curriculum?**

**L:** Don't just celebrate Black History Month; it's about weaving diversity into the core curriculum. If we are talking about STEM and scientists, let's have a discussion on black scientists – so we don't just talk about black scientists during Black History Month. I should be saying to teachers, especially within communities that don't have a rich mix of diversity, are you casting your net wide enough? If we go back in history, there have been many black STEM people who have been, and are, great inventors and scientists. There are so many people who didn't get the recognition that they deserve. History has been written to benefit white people and not black people. As a quick example, 500 years ago Africa was a very wealthy continent, but we don't learn about that in this country (Akyeampong and Fofack, 2015).

**C: How do we become anti-racist teachers?**

**L:** I think if teachers want to become allies, if teachers want to become anti-racist, it is important that they do the reading, because there's a difference between saying 'I'm anti-racist' and simply saying, 'I'm not racist'. I would like all teachers to be on a journey to becoming anti-racist. And they can be – if they do their research and they read up about the discrimination that especially black British people have

experienced. Once you start reading, it will make you want to become anti-racist, if you've got it in your heart to become anti-racist, that is.

**C: One of the things I see teachers doing is adding a global dimension to learning. Is this different to representation?**

**L:** I think that basically we have to be careful that we don't become tokenistic. We need to try to not do things as an add-on, not just having one item and thinking we've done it. Not just doing something as an afterthought, it should be central, it should be part of your core offer.

**C: How do we make our core offer more consistently diverse? How do we ensure that we aren't just being tokenistic?**

**L:** It's about looking at the resources you do have. Looking to see who is in the school community, who can support you with this, perhaps by buying or donating authentic artefacts. What resources have you got? It is about making sure that the physical resources you use are authentic. For example, in early years, rather than buying fixed role-play costumes, like a Spiderman costume or a nurse's or fire officer's uniform, which plays into gender stereotypes and does little to support children's imagination, purchase a range of African or Asian fabrics. When you provide different material, children use their imaginations more and make the costume they imagine rather than the costume that is decided for them.

**Resources to promote representation**

- **My skin, your skin** by Laura Henry-Allain MBE, illustrated by Onyinye Iwu (Penguin Random House, in press, available now for pre-order).
- **Superhero scientists** by David Allen and Alex Sinclair (Millgate House, 2021).
- **Potatoes for Peace** (education charity) founded by Dr Sima Barmania - [www.potatoesforpeace.org](http://www.potatoesforpeace.org)
- **Practical Action** (international development organisation) – [www.practicalaction.org](http://www.practicalaction.org)
- **The tiney guide to becoming an inclusive, anti-racist early educator** by Laura Henry-Allain MBE and Matt Lloyd-Rose: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16dX9uYy3i-4U8VJShBURWyESgkznqoUp/view>
- **A scientist just like me** by Candy Jiang, analytical chemist (PSTT): <https://pstt.org.uk/resources/curriculum-materials/a-scientist-just-like-me>
- **The Early Years Black List** (for networking with colleagues): [www.theearlyyearsblacklist.com](http://www.theearlyyearsblacklist.com) / @ EYBLUK
- **Research cards: Women in physics / Black physicists** (The Ogden Trust): [www.ogdentrust.com/resources/research-cards-women-in-physics](http://www.ogdentrust.com/resources/research-cards-women-in-physics) [www.ogdentrust.com/resources/research-cards-black-physicists](http://www.ogdentrust.com/resources/research-cards-black-physicists)

**C: So, it is about broadening our thinking about science, looking at how other people see science and use science in their everyday lives?**

**L:** Yes. It is about casting your net out. So, for instance, what objects might they use in St Lucia to learn about STEM subjects? Think more broadly, rather than making learning always very UK-centric.

**Conclusion**

Our conversation got me thinking. Are we enabling all children to see recognisable and authentic realities? When we develop the home corner, whose home does it represent? Do we

have dominant ideas of what a home might look like? Do we always default to replicating our own childhood or do we think to include authentic objects used in other homes?

When we talk about science, whose ideas about science are we teaching? Do we promote predominantly white stories of science or do we routinely share stories from around the world? We should be representing a broader outlook, rather than perpetuating what we're used to, because that's how the world is. Diversity is normal. Isn't it about time our curriculum reflected that?

Figures 3 and 4 from *CBeebies JoJo & Gran Gran* series, courtesy of the BBC.



**Figure 4** CBeebies image of *JoJo and Gran Gran* visiting the farm

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