Cogan Diversity Picture Book Award 2019
Ruth Morgan, ALNCo at Cogan Primary School

Our Diversity Picture Book Award was born of a number of ideas which came together at an ideal time. As part of our school’s new ‘Llais’ pupil-led curriculum and as the school’s ALNCo, this year I was given the task of leading a ‘diversity’-themed group of fifteen 7-to-11 year olds. After enthusiastic feedback from our teachers who helped judge the UKLA Book Awards last year, I wondered if I was being too ambitious in thinking we might run a diverse book award of our own? The clincher was a conversation I had with our English Co-ordinator, Michelle Owen, who said it had often occurred to her that there are children in her class who never see a character who looks like them represented in picture books. I was aware that lack of representation has been a recent criticism of the publishing industry. So why not? Why couldn’t we at Cogan run our own national book award to promote diversity and inclusion?

Was there, perhaps some regulation precluding an organisation from setting up their own book award? I began by making phone calls to literary bodies which might be expected to know. The biggest help I received – and continue to receive - was from Bob Gelsthorpe, Programmes and Communications Co-ordinator at Literature Wales who said he didn’t know of any reason why we couldn’t do what we were proposing and gave me several useful pointers. After that it was all systems go. I asked the PTA for £100 for books to kickstart the long list and with the help of our local bookshop in Penarth, Griffin Books, we selected twelve titles. Not knowing whether any publishers would take notice of our award, it was important to secure its success, so it was a good idea to invest in the initial long list. Our criteria were as follows: picture books suitable for mainly 3-7 year olds; published between 1st March 2017 and 30th September 2018; books with strong themes of tolerance and inclusion or positive representation of minorities: so ethnically diverse, culturally diverse or non-stereotypical characters or
characters with disabilities. Apart from links to the school website and a news page on the Literature Wales site, the campaign has mainly taken place on Twitter (we are @DiversityCogan) and one of our first tweets (liked or retweeted by Michael Rosen, Floella Benjamin and Sally Holland) was as follows:

‘We are a small South Wales primary school trying to do something BIG. We have 17 languages spoken, many pupils with disabilities and many kinds of families… it’s why we created the Cogan Diversity Picture Book Award 2019’

I spent a pretty frenetic start of half term tweeting and emailing publishers to invite them to submit, explaining that eligible titles (in English or Welsh) would automatically enter the long list. Their response has been extraordinary. We have had the most beautiful books sent to us and currently our very long long list stands at 45 titles. Our main job now is for the children to become very familiar with this set of books, so they can eventually begin the judging process because the children are the ones voting in this award. We will be shortlisting in March and an award ceremony for the winning author/illustrator or author and illustrator team will be held in June. If the winners are unable to attend the ceremony, we will send them their beautiful trophy/trophies, made by the children, ahead of time asking if they could make a small film to show at the ceremony.

The benefits for the children are making themselves ever more apparent. We are reading the books with as many of the children as possible, not only with my Llais group but in assemblies, class reading times and in an optional but well attended lunchtime ‘Diversity Book-buddy’ club. The award has certainly increased the amount of self-selection and reading for pleasure going on at school. We have had some fascinating discussions about diversity and inclusion and the children have shown that they understand the need for fair representation of all members of society in children’s books. A quote from one enthusiastic year 6 pupil was “I remember the Mayor of London talking about this on the news”. As well as enjoying the books for their own sake, older pupils have responded warmly to the responsibility of recommending books for a younger audience. Children have been providing quotes for Twitter about the individual titles and we are moving into a phase when they will be asked to compare books in a variety of different ways e.g. the appeal of the characters, quality of illustration, clarity of message if it’s non-fiction or simply, how would you like this book if you were similar to one of the characters? Fair enough, there may be aspects of the books that the children don’t like but the ground rule is, we discuss negative aspects privately, to inform the judging process, and only publicise positive comments on the internet. In addition to our Twitter quotes, we are beginning to post book reviews on the children’s book review website, Toppsta. I am hoping that a by-product of this process will be that the children reflect upon what kind of books they enjoy, as it takes time to cultivate one’s taste as a reader and in my experience, finding the right book helps one’s motivation to read enormously.

It has been a lot of work to set up, but the book award is now settling down into a way of life. End-of-the-school-day tweets and being very responsive on Twitter is key and we are building a steady following amongst authors, illustrators and publishers. The simple fact is, authors love getting book reviews, in fact if readers only realised what an encouragement getting a review is to an author, perhaps they’d do it more. We have had such a positive reaction to the award from those in the publishing industry, it’s quite overwhelming.
There are so many possible book awards that a school could set up but it’s important to realise the scale of what you’re taking on. I would suggest that whoever co-ordinates the award be relieved of other, for example extracurricular responsibilities, to make sure they have the time to do it properly. My advice is to select a theme, ideally something relevant to your school. Obviously ‘Diversity Picture Books’ has gone because we are doing that at Cogan! However, there are many themes and genres which lend themselves beautifully, including historical novels, non-fiction, speculative fiction (fantasy/scifi) or eco-based topics. Of course, a school’s award could be for middle grade (8-12 year olds) or Young Adult categories. How about drawing a fifty mile radius around the school and launching an award for local children’s authors? What I would discourage however, is expecting more significant ‘freebies’ like free visits: authors have to eat too. Literature Wales’ excellent ‘Writers on Tour’ scheme can assist with the cost of workshop visits.

I’m lucky to work in a school that’s willing to try something new and our book award has been something very new indeed. I’m also lucky to work in a school where staff are all willing to get on board with a new project and get fired up about it. We are looking forward to an exciting year of reading and discussion ahead, with the real purpose of making the world a fairer place and arriving at a satisfying conclusion next June.