

The search for more COMPLEX RACIAL AND ETHNIC REPRESENTATION in grade school books



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The search for more COMPLEX RACIAL AND ETHNIC REPRESENTATION in grade school books

By Tanji Reed Marshall, Ph.D., Former Director of P-12 Practice and William H. Rodick, Ph.D., P-12 Practice Lead

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From infancy on, children are perpetual learners — and it often starts with a book. Parents are babies' first teachers, reading to them to coach them into speaking their first words. By the time children enter school, they are ready for a deeper understanding of the people and the world around them. But the truth is, children's exposure to rich, diverse characters and cultures in books and curricula is extremely limited.

Children gain immense benefits from curricula that are representationally diverse and that allow students to see themselves and others complexly. Students are more engaged when they see people like themselves in school materials,¹ and that increased engagement from representation leads to improved academic outcomes like sharpened critical thinking skills and increases in standardized test scores,² as well as higher rates of course completion, graduation, and school attendance.³ Students reap non-academic benefits as well, such as improved self-esteem, socioemotional well-being, empathy, and a greater appreciation for cultural differences.⁴ Again, this starts with books.

Unfortunately, curricula have never been representationally diverse, and this lack of diversity and inclusion in school curricula harms students — more than half of whom are students of color. Implicit biases are embedded across publishing, curriculum development, and teaching fields, all of which are themselves far less diverse than student populations. Negative representations in curricular materials, such as stereotypes, affect student engagement, performance, and the opportunities they have to pursue challenging academic pathways.⁵

Children benefit immensely from curricula that are representationally diverse and that allow students to see themselves and others complexly

Researchers of curricula representation have identified large disparities in who gets included and who doesn't. There has always been representation in curricula — and that representation is predominantly White. That dominance of representation by White individuals has been found in U.S. history textbooks (over half of illustrations), middle-school health books (49% of images), Newberry Award-winning books (69%), and children's board books (90%).⁶

For this study, we sought to add to the understanding of **who** is represented — the counts of authors and characters by race — by focusing on the **how** of representation. Our assessment of **how** people, groups, and topics are represented is based on degrees of complexity. People of color are too often represented by what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "a single story," where people of color are infrequently included in curricula and children's books, and when they are included, they are limited by reductive representations like stereotypes. By setting a standard for complexity, we are pushing for curricula to achieve a "representational balance" that allows all students to see themselves and others in rich and varied ways that more accurately reflect the realities of people's lives.

The Ed Trust team convened experts, consulted publishers, and reviewed the literature. We also analyzed and synthesized components of the many valuable tools being used to understand cultural responsiveness, bias, and inclusivity across curricular disciplines and student populations.

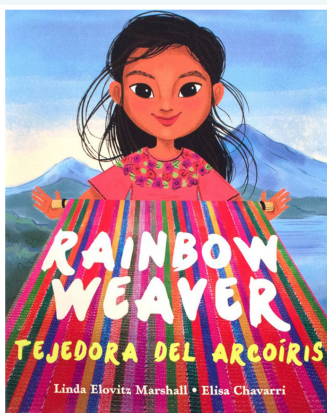
It can be difficult for any of us to see past our implicit biases, which is why we developed the Tool for Representational Balance in Books to give publishers, district leaders, educators, caregivers, students, and others a framework for deeply engaging in materials to assess representation in the books they choose.

The tool is designed to guide a reader through any text to determine how people, cultures, and topics are represented. It includes 10 criteria, each framed as a question for readers to consider as they analyze the text. For our study, we applied the tool to a sample of 300 K-8 books selected from five curricula favorably rated by EdReports, an organization that evaluates curricula based on alignment to the Common Core standards and other indicators of quality. With the tool, we could evaluate how people of color, groups of color, and social and historical topics are portrayed.

OUR FINDINGS

- **White authors and characters are far more prevalent than authors and characters of any other race or ethnicity.**
- **When people of color are included in curricula, they are often portrayed in limited ways. Almost half of the people of color centered in the books we read are one-dimensional, portrayed negatively, or do not have agency.**
- **When books include groups and cultures of color, they often use stereotypes, disconnect culture from individual people, or portray that group as less than or unequal to others.**
- **When historical and social topics are included, they are almost always sanitized, told through a singular perspective, or are disconnected from the structural realities that help students make meaning of the reading.**

Less than one-third (31%) of the books that include groups of color provide what we define as complex representation



A detailed description of the multigenerational practice of weaving is enriched by Spanish translation but situated in a “treasure from trash” storyline, where the value of weaving depends on the interests of White tourists.

Although the findings are bleak, they also illuminate the path forward. We know from our work with curriculum publishers that they are putting in concerted effort to improve representation in materials, and there has been better inclusion of the diversity of student identities over the years. That task is ever more difficult in a political moment where bad actors aim to ban and censor reality from schools. We also know that publishers are facing pressures that lead to self-censorship and decisions that further exclude authors and characters of color.⁷

More than 40% of people of color centered in texts demonstrate what we define as limited representation



Tessie and Mamma joyously dance in the rain with neighbors, but there is little description of them as individuals or of their effect on others.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Challenge dominant norms and singular perspectives

2. Expand publisher and educator definitions of cultural relevance

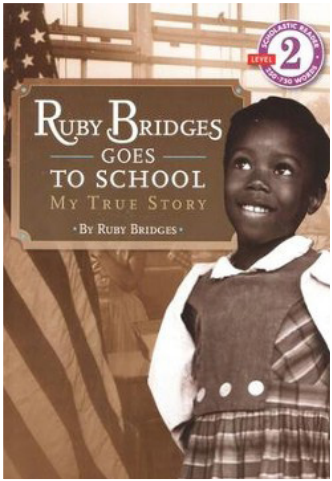
3. Ask a new set of questions about representation

4. Consider how texts sit in conversation with one another

5. Expand educator choice in curated materials

6. Provide professional learning to all curriculum decision-makers, including authors and developers.

The majority (80%) of books that include historical or social topics demonstrate what we define as limited representation



Legal segregation is framed as an individual problem — as people thinking “black people and white people should not be friends,” which can be solved if we are kind to one another.

Ultimately, our hope is that the people who create, publish, and select children’s books for their curricula will take a closer look at their offerings to ensure that texts provide richer representations of people, cultures, and historical and social topics. **Representational balance is a necessary component of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM).** Our [online tool](#) offers decision-makers an opportunity to choose curricula that goes beyond superficial understandings of what it means to be culturally relevant. All children deserve to be exposed to rich, diverse characters and cultures in books so they can reap the benefits of seeing themselves and others complexly depicted in an increasingly complex world. We stand firm with the idea that what students need is more, not less — more information, more context, more diversity, more opportunities for making their own determinations about what is and is not valuable to them.

For a deeper dive into our methodology and findings, as well as more examples of the 300 books that we evaluated using our tool, please read our full report. And to use our Tool for Representational Balance in Books, visit edtrust.org/booktool.

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“WATER IS THE FIRST MEDICINE, NAKOMIS TOLD ME.”¹ This opening sentence that introduces the children’s book, *We Are Water Protectors* is simple, but those eight words alone communicate more about the Ojibwe people than many students will ever see in their language arts curriculum. On that first page, the reader is introduced not just to two characters sharing knowledge and values from one generation to another. The knowledge and values here are specifically cultural — a perception of water itself as medicine — but the practice is universal, as is the environmental concern that this book for first-grade students explores.

What makes this brief introduction to the people, culture, and topic especially unique is that none of it is situated in anyone else’s culture or perspective. The reader is not told that Nokomis could mean “grandmother” in Ojibwe, or even that the people on the page are Ojibwe, and this perspective of water is not treated as anything other than the standard perspective.

However, this is not how people from traditionally marginalized groups are usually presented in English language arts curricula; rather, they are depicted as a vignette, an exception to the rule, an “other.” But imagine the profound impact of a book like *We Are Water Protectors* on a student who shares the characters’ background, experiences, and values.

No less important is the diversity of knowledge and the expansion of understanding that all students gain through curricula that include a wide range of experiences and perspectives — this is the key ingredient to critical thinking.² Another example is the picture book, *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*, a biography of the labor leader who co-founded the National Farm Workers Union and helped advance civil rights for farm laborers — most of whom had experiences like Chavez’s and who continue to fight for adequate pay and safe working conditions to this day.³ But these powerful learning opportunities are missed when a book like *Harvesting Hope* is banned from classrooms — as was the case in Central York, Pennsylvania, in 2021.⁴ Student thinking has the potential to expand across disciplines and reflect the rigor all students deserve. *Harvesting Hope* achieves this by introducing third through eighth graders to a heroic figure of the Latino community, (an ever-growing segment of U.S. population), to work and the interconnectedness of its varied forms, to civil rights and the unique forms of social change that are made possible in the United States, and to the law as a living guidebook for a democratic society.

Unfortunately, these examples are more the exception than the norm. Despite 52% of public school enrollment being students of color, racial and ethnic diversity in curricula is severely lacking. Many children are learning about the world and each other through texts containing narrow perspectives that often represent people and cultures in stereotypically negative and limited ways and present complex historical and social topics in overly simplistic ways.

This is troubling for many reasons — most importantly because it threatens to undermine children’s ability to develop critical thought. Additionally, it compromises education equity and makes it harder for students to learn about and discuss critical topics like racism, sexism, and gender identity at a time when we should be finding better and more, not fewer, thoughtful ways to discuss these issues in the classroom. Research shows that students learn and perform better when they see themselves and their experiences authentically and non-stereotypically reflected in their school curriculum and White students learn about the complexity of the world and the people in it by engaging with authors and characters of different races and ethnicities.⁵ Deeper and more realistic understandings about people and cultures prepare all students to live and work in our increasingly diverse and multicultural world.⁶

Narrowly constructed curricula also run counter to calls for more high-quality instructional materials and for curriculum publishers and developers to improve their offerings.⁷ The quality of instructional materials has typically been measured based on three main components:

1. Alignment to state standards
2. Knowledge building and text complicity
3. Classroom usability⁸

Such measures, while essential to academic success, fail to consider the representation of people, cultures, and topics of instructional materials. Even though data over the last five years has shown shifts in curricula development and character representation, there are still representational imbalances in English Language Arts (ELA) materials at the author, character, and culture levels. These imbalances perpetuate the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of traditionally marginalized groups.



In this report, we present findings from an examination of texts where we looked at the representation of characters, cultures, and topics to get a sense of how each of these components are presented to readers. Our analysis highlights the need to look at authorship and at how authors portray people, cultures, and topics. For there to be representational balance, people from traditionally marginalized groups must be depicted in all their complexity.

The purpose of this report is to offer a deeper understanding of what a high-quality and culturally relevant curricula should look like. We stand firm in the belief that a diverse curriculum is a strong curriculum, and that quality is also a function of *how* people and cultures are represented and *how* topics such as food insecurity, segregation, pollution, etc., are treated. With all that in mind, we examined a variety of 300 books, from kindergarten through eighth grade, from leading curriculum publishers whose materials partially or fully met measures of high quality by EdReports, an organization that evaluates curricula based on alignment to the Common Core standards and other indicators of quality.

Our starting point in conceptualizing representational balance was an understanding of the current imbalance in representation across curriculum. In U.S. public schools, children often encounter books that value a cultural norm that centers a Eurocentric/White sensibility. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) started tracking the racial representations of characters in children's literature in 1985, by identifying very few books by Black authors and illustrators — 18 out of 2,500 estimated books published. Since then, the CCBC and others have expanded their analysis to characters and the inclusion of other racial and ethnic groups. The good news is that there are more characters of color and more characters from marginalized communities presented on the page today. Over the past five years, the inclusion of people of color across groups has increased from a combined total of 30% in 2018, to a combined total of 35% in 2022 (the most recent year for which numbers are available).⁹ Characters identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community, once absent from curricula, are now featured in just over 2% of books (of the 4,410 books in the Diverse BookFinder collection).¹⁰

However, these increases in representation still do not match the diversity of student populations and progress has been undermined by tactics like using animals as proxies for diversity. In fact, animals have greater representation than people of color: In 2019, animals accounted for 27% of characters in texts while characters of color accounted for 23% — behind White characters, who represented 50% of all children's book characters.¹¹ Nevertheless, we see this shift as opening the door for students to see themselves and others in higher frequencies with greater consideration for how communities are represented when they are included.

We devised a conceptual framework for examining texts through the lens of representational balance, with consideration for how people (real and fictional), cultures, and topics are presented and relate to or “sit in conversation” with one another. To use our Tool for Representational Balance in Books, visit edtrust.org/booktool.

We wanted to gain insight into how authors present and represent people and cultures. So, we examined whether cultures were associated with stereotypes; whether characters were linked to their cultures; and whether cultures were shown as having assets or deficits. We also examined texts to determine if historical or social topics were portrayed as complex or overly simplified. We then considered whether topics are presented according to what would be characterized as White dominant cultural norms or whether readers have access to multiple perspectives. The most important finding in our initial analysis may be how little diversity existed for sexual orientation, disability status, relationship to the justice system, and other aspects of identity that mirror the multifaceted and intersectional complexity of student identities. That limitation led us to focus this report’s analysis on people of color. In this report, we continue the work of the CCBC and others by reporting on the number of authors and people of color in the books children read and we add to that work by analyzing representation complexity for people of color, groups of color, and historical and social topics. We found that less than 40% of the texts in our sample feature groups of color. Most books that feature groups of color, across all grade levels, portray them through limited representation, such as through stereotypes or as background to the stories of others.

Understanding the significance of authorship, we analyzed the racial and ethnic congruence between authors and the people (real and fictional) they center in books. By examining how authors write about people, cultures, and topics, we may better understand how curriculum publishers can organize texts to provide all learners opportunities to authentically see themselves in the books they read in class instead of being relegated to the educational margins. Authors and publishers possess the power to address the representational imbalances or perpetuate narratives that are tantamount to racial and ethnic erasure.

In our examination of 300 texts, we found the following:

- 1. White authors and characters are far more prevalent than authors of any other race or ethnicity.**
- 2. When people of color are included, they are portrayed in limited ways. Almost half of the people of color centered in books we read were one-dimensional characters, portrayed negatively, or do not have agency.**
- 3. When books include groups and cultures of color, they often use stereotypes, disconnect culture from individual people or portray that group as less than or unequal to others.**
- 4. When historical and social topics are included, they are almost always sanitized, told through a singular perspective, or are disconnected from the structural realities that help students make meaning of the reading.**

These findings offer a critical lens to highlight the need for deeper and more authentic cultural representation in instructional materials deemed high-quality. We recognize that not all children will have access to a wide enough array of texts to afford them opportunities to see members of racial and ethnic groups across the vast spectrum of humanity; however, representation matters, and it is important that people, cultures, and topics be presented in all their depth and dimensions. While the findings might lead decision-makers to remove texts that entrench negative stereotypes, that is not our aim. We believe text removal is a form of censorship and is harmful to children. Our push is for better understanding, so that negative representation does not go unaddressed.

This report comes at a time when curricula are under attack. At current count, 44 states have taken steps to limit how race and related topics are discussed in schools.¹² The justification for censorship in these states is that education has somehow gone too far — that K-12 education has too much diversity, that it contains too many perspectives, especially those that enable students to think critically about our past and present. Our findings suggest that this is far from the truth. While publishers, state boards, districts, and educators have worked hard in recent years to increase representation in curricula, there is still much more to be done to provide all students with a diverse and intellectually rigorous schooling experience that will prepare them for college and beyond.

Our goal is to spur publishers and curriculum decision-makers to more thoroughly examine texts and ask critical questions about how people, cultures, and topics are represented therein, so they might better see the subtle and problematic depictions that stereotype and marginalize people and cultures. Ultimately, this is all about how learners can develop the necessary critical-thinking skills that will equip them to engage in examining their world through wider lenses as they encounter literary and informational texts.



METHODOLOGY

CREATING AND APPLYING A TOOL FOR REPRESENTATIONAL BALANCE IN BOOKS

STEP ONE: Design a tool to assess the representational balance of traditionally marginalized groups

The first question guiding this work was, “What tools could be used to determine the quality of representational balance of traditionally marginalized groups?”¹³ The Ed Trust team convened experts, consulted publishers, and reviewed the literature. We also analyzed and synthesized components of the many valuable tools being used to understand cultural responsiveness, bias, and inclusivity across curricular disciplines and student populations.

Our [Tool for Representational Balance](#) in Books is designed to guide a reader through any text to determine how people, cultures, and topics are represented.¹⁴ It includes 10 criteria, each framed as a question for readers to consider as they analyze the text.

	SECTION II: PEOPLE How are people of color included? ¹⁵	SECTION III: CULTURES How are groups and cultures of color included?	SECTION IV: TOPICS How are historical and social topics presented?
SECTION I: CREATOR AND CHARACTER IDENTITY Whose stories are being told, and who are the storytellers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are people of color multidimensional? Do people of color have agency? Are people of color positively influential? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are people, groups, and cultures of color represented without stereotypes? Are people of color immersed in groups and cultures? Are groups and cultures presented positively or as having assets? Are multiple groups and cultures portrayed as equally valuable? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are historical or social topics presented without sanitization? Are topics presented through perspectives that include those given marginalized identities? Is there a connection between topic presentations and the real experiences of students?

Less than 40% of the texts in our sample feature groups of color, and most of these books, across all grade levels, portray groups and cultures through limited representation

STEP TWO: Use the tool to assess the representational balance of traditionally marginalized groups in curricula characterized as high quality

The second question guiding this work was, “How are traditionally marginalized groups of people (e.g., people of color) represented in curricula characterized as high quality?” To answer this question, we applied our Tool for Representational Balance in Books to 300 texts from the curriculum publisher partners with whom we consulted in developing the tool.

We collected trade book lists from publishers that represent a large proportion of the curricula in K-8 ELA classrooms and that partially or fully met measures of high-quality from EdReports. We included both widely recognized and lesser-known publishers, though even the smallest publishers in our sample reach hundreds of thousands of classrooms.

We focused on trade book lists because reading long-form, grade-level trade books improves student literacy and gives students a chance to engage deeply with reading materials and content.¹⁶ From those trade book lists, we selected core texts that publishers identified as expected reading for all students, as opposed to texts that are recommended for supplemental reading. We also prioritized texts that were repeated across publisher lists, since these texts likely reach more students.

Where possible, we randomized the selection and assignment of books. We first selected books for our review as we could access them — access was dependent on the release of trade book lists from our publisher partners and the availability of books through libraries, a subscription service, and an online store. We also made selection decisions that would allow us to reach thresholds of at least 25% saturation from each curriculum publisher and from each grade-level band (K-2, 3-5, and 6-8), for a total of 300 books.

We created relevant indicators for the 10 criteria of the tool. For ease of understanding and communicating patterns in our sample, we use the following labels in this report:

Complex	Partial	Limited
Representation that mirrors the complexity of people, cultures, and topics	Representation that is not quite complex	Representation that perpetuates the marginalization of people, cultures, and topics

We refer to people of color and groups of color throughout this paper. In the United States today, race is often conceptualized through the categories of people of color and White people, particularly in discussions related to projects of justice.¹⁷ Like Paris,¹⁸ we recognize that although the use of people of color as a term implies connectedness across groups experiencing discrimination and exclusion, it also obscures distinctions across and within groups, particularly for ethnic groups (e.g., Latino and Jewish) that are often analyzed alongside racial groups, though they are comprised of many varying racial identities.¹⁹ We also recognize such distinctions are further flattened when people are grouped into ethnoracial categories that make comparison across them convenient, such as has been done in the tables in this report.²⁰ Although people are quite complex, the identities present in the books in our sample are not. Therefore, we find value in discussing the limits of the representation of racial and ethnic groups in our sample through the imperfect methods used in this report.

Reading long-form, grade-level trade books improves student literacy and gives students a chance to engage deeply with reading materials and content

People who experience discrimination and exclusion (antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, etc.), based on additional and/or intersecting aspects of identity were rare in our sample. For example, 85 of the people centered in our sample could be identified as heterosexual but only two people could be identified as gay, the only other sexual orientation present. All texts in our sample that identified a person's gender implied those people were cisgender (their gender identity corresponds to the sex registered for them at birth). One book included people central to the text that were impacted by the justice system. Six individuals with disabilities were central to texts in our sample, and half of those were the historical figures of Franklin Roosevelt, Louis Braille, and Temple Grandin. The identities of groups that are nearly or completely absent in our sample warrant further explanation.



FINDINGS

As stated earlier in this report, children's books are sorely lacking diverse authorship and character representation. Our findings represent a continuation of the work by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, *The New York Times*, and others, and tell an additional story about how people, cultures, and topics are presented.

1. Books are most often written by White authors and center the stories of White people

- White author representation is nearly seven times more prevalent than the next largest rate of representation, which is of Black authors.
- 97 of the books in our sample center any people of color (Black, Asian, Latino, Native American, Middle Eastern, and mixed race), while 73 of the books in our sample center White people.

2. People of color (real or fictional) are often limited to negative or background representation

- Just over half (53%) of people of color centered in our sample are portrayed with what we define as complex representation by demonstrating multidimensionality, agency, and a positive influence.
- More than 40% of people of color centered in our sample do not meet those criteria, demonstrating what we define as limited representation.

3. Groups and cultures of color are often represented negatively

- 118 of the books in our sample (39%) include groups of color.
- Less than a third (31%) of the books that include groups of color provide what we define as complex representation by avoiding stereotypes, immersing people in culture, and portraying groups of color positively and as equally valuable to other groups.
- Over half (54%) of the books in our sample that include groups of color do not meet those criteria, demonstrating what we define as limited representation.

4. Historical and social topics are often sanitized or disconnected from student realities

- 137 of the books in our sample (46%) include historical or social topics
- Few (16%) of the books that include historical or social topics provide what we define as complex representation by avoiding sanitization, including a marginalized perspective, and connecting the topic to student realities
- The majority (80%) of books that include historical or social topics do not meet those criteria, demonstrating what we define as limited representation, and in some cases, represent intellectual condescension

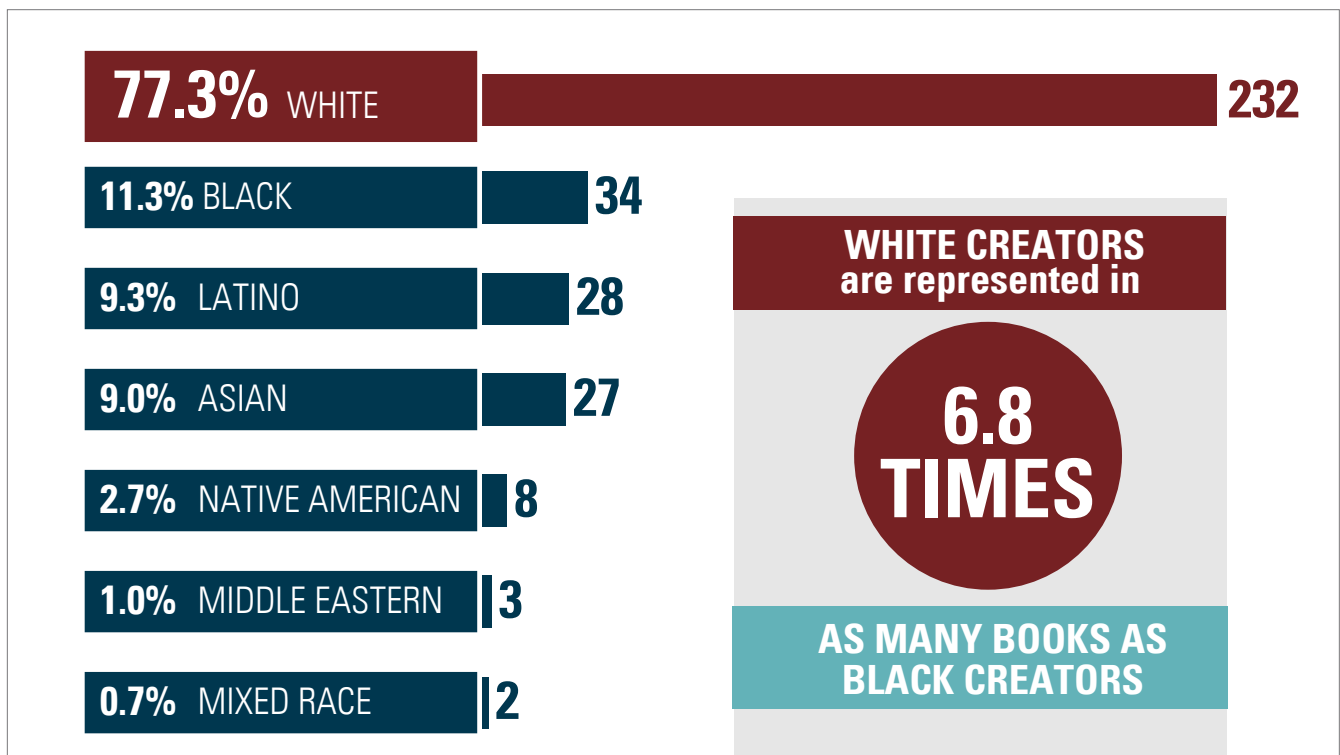
SECTION 1: CREATOR AND CHARACTER IDENTITY

Who is writing children's books?

An important aspect of representation is text authorship: Who is writing the stories and illustrating the images that children see? As author Zora Neale Hurston said, when our collective stories are told by one group, those stories will not accurately hold up a mirror to reality but will instead reproduce the limited perceptions of those authors.²¹ Hurston was speaking specifically about how White authors and publishers in the 1940s and '50s were dominating the industry and limiting readers' understanding of Black people and Black culture, but the sentiment can be applied to any imbalance in author representation. Moreover, Hurston's words are still relevant today. The vast majority of the publishing industry is comprised of White people — 76% White, 74% cisgender women, 81% straight, and 89% non-disabled. Not unsurprisingly, the books that are published reflect this lack of diversity.²²

We reviewed the biographies of authors in our sample to learn how they identify themselves by race.²³ We found that 77% of the 300 texts in our sample feature at least one White author or illustrator.²⁴ White authors and illustrators are represented in nearly seven times as many books as Black authors and illustrators, the second largest group. Our findings corroborate studies by the Cooperative Children's Book Center,²⁵ and a *New York Times* review of widely read books over a 68-year period (up to 2018) that found that 89% of the books were written by White authors.²⁶

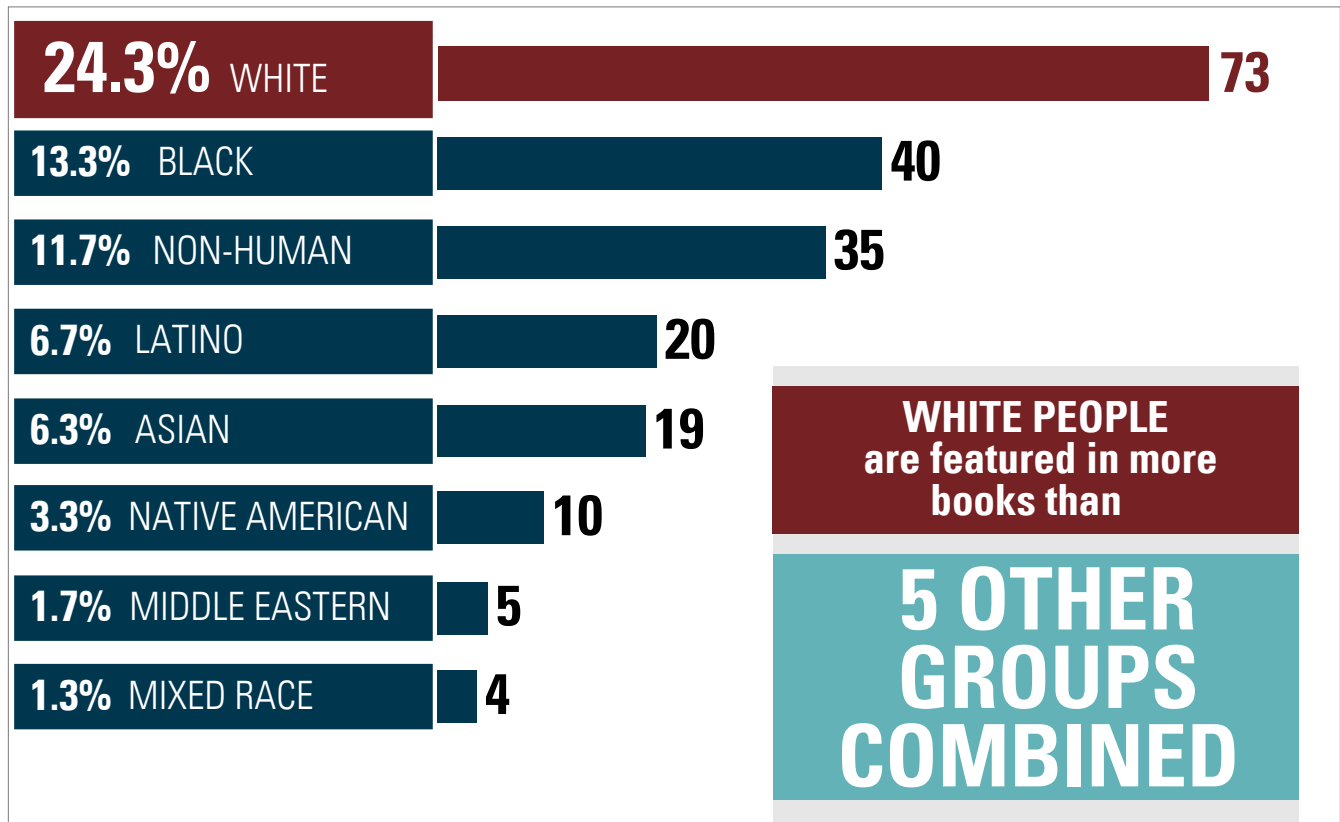
FIGURE 1. 232 out of 300 books in our sample feature at least one White author or illustrator²⁷



WHOSE STORIES ARE STUDENTS READING?

An imbalance in author representation influences who gets included as the subjects of books. The predominance of White authors and illustrators in our sample explains the large disparity in representation we found among the people who are centered in children’s books. Of the 300 books in our sample, 73 books center White people. Meanwhile, about one-third, or 97, center any people of color.²⁸

FIGURE 2. 73 out of the 300 books in our sample feature at least one person (real or fictional) who is White²⁹



We also considered representation based on the total number of people centered across all books. Of the 280 people or characters centered in our sample, 34% are White. These findings align with research that has shown mainstream award-winning children’s books include a high proportion of characters with lighter skin color.³⁰

The next two largest groups centered in our texts, each at 16% of our sample, are Black people and characters that are not human, such as animals. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center also found in their reviews that non-human characters make up a large share of children’s book representation.³¹ Animals have always been a staple of children’s books; however, between 2015 and 2018, animal representation jumped from 13% to 27%. Notably, around this time, several groups, such as We Need Diverse Books, formed to push against the overrepresentation of White characters in children’s literature. Animals don’t just make up a sizable portion of the characters in children’s books, they often are stand-ins for the representation of people of color in problematic ways. For example, we examined Eric Kimmel’s series on Anansi, which takes the Akan trickster deity of knowledge and removes his stature, culture, and wisdom, portraying him as a lazy spider in a community of other talking animals.

Section 2: People

How do students see themselves and others?

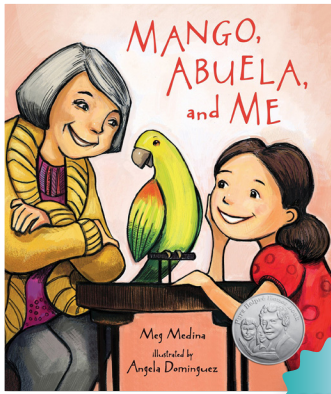
Beyond understanding whose voices and whose stories students are reading, we sought to understand how the people (real or fictional) in those stories are represented. It's important for students to see people from traditionally marginalized groups, such as people of color, evolving and making choices about their lives in texts. As author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said, we must avoid "the danger of a single story."³² People of color are infrequently represented in children's literature, which makes each instance of representation, whether it is full and complex, or negative and limiting, ever more important. So much of a child's perception of themselves and of others is shaped by the stories they read and hear in school.

To explore the complexity of individuals, we looked at whether people of color are **multidimensional**, **have agency**, and are **positively influential**. Media studies have assessed representation in film, journalism, and written works using indicators that evaluate if women (e.g., Bechdel Test), people of color (e.g., DuVernay Test), and LGBTQ+ people (e.g., Vito Russo Test) "have fully realized lives rather than serve as scenery in White stories."³³ Several tools used to assess representation in literature and curriculum also emphasize the issues and opportunities for complex representation that echo the importance of multidimensionality, agency, and character influence. These aspects of character are also key to ELA standards related to character development analysis.³⁴

Question	Are people of color multidimensional ?	Do people of color have agency ?	Are people of color positively influential ?
Indicators	Are people of color described and do they undergo change?	Do people of color make major decisions with consequences for others?	Are people of color described by their assets and do they have a positive role in major decisions?

The ways a person may be represented, based on the indicators above, align to three categories:

Complex	Partial	Limited
People are multidimensional, have agency, and are positively described	People are either multidimensional, have agency, or are positively described	People are not multidimensional, have no agency, or are negatively described



Mia and her abuela learn from one another and grow together, resulting in a deep and loving bond.

COMPLEX



Belle's joy is richly described, but she is not shown to change or make decisions that affect others.

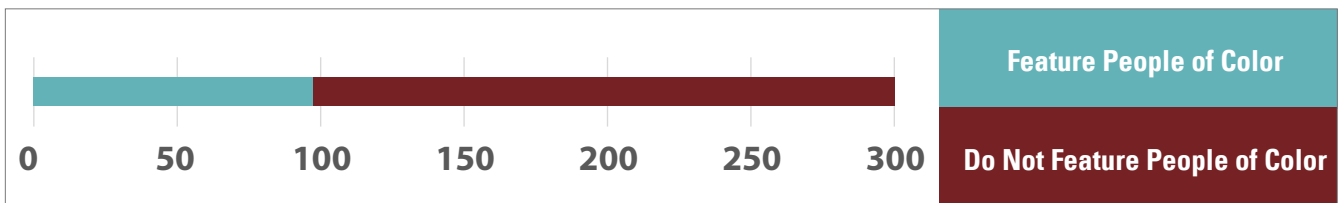
PARTIAL



Tessie and Mamma joyously dance in the rain with neighbors, but there is little description of them as individuals or of their effect on others.

LIMITED

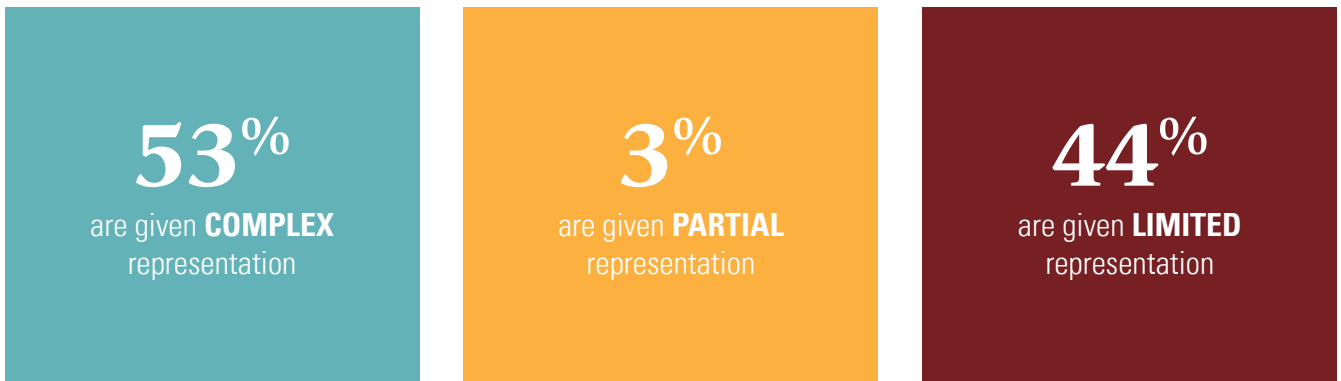
About one-third of the books in our sample (32%) feature people of color



A SLIM MAJORITY OF PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE GIVEN COMPLEX REPRESENTATION

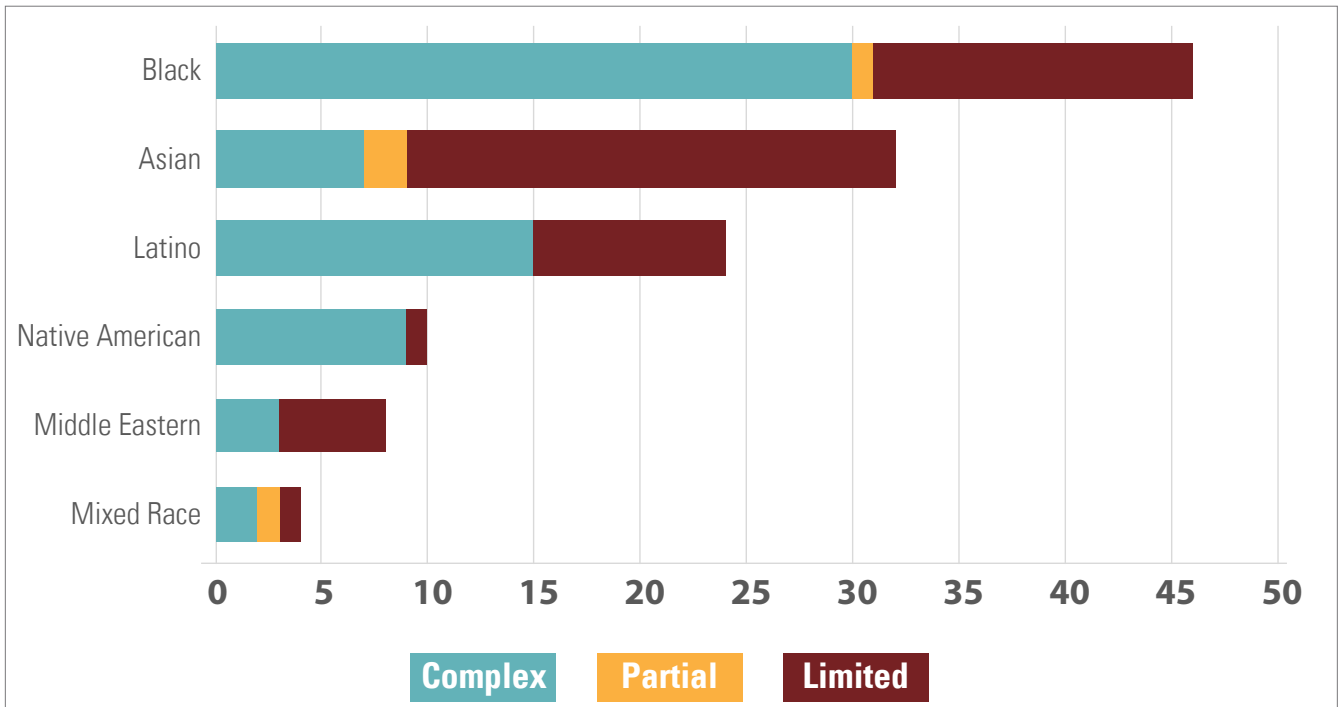
Across the 300 books we reviewed, 280 people (real or fictional) were identified as central to the texts and essential to the story or information shared — 124 of those people are people of color. When we examined how people of color are represented in texts, we found just over half fall into the category of complex representation. These individuals are multidimensional, have agency, and are positively described. However, more than 40% of people of color have limited representation, meaning they lack multidimensionality or agency, or they are negatively described.

One such character with limited representation is Juan Bobo in the picture book *Juan Bobo Goes to Work*. This often-shared tale from Puerto Rico centers on a bumbling boy whose mistakes unexpectedly have positive results. Juan Bobo makes decisions that affect others, but those decisions are steeped in a negative portrayal of Juan Bobo's intellect — a feature that does not change over the course of the book.

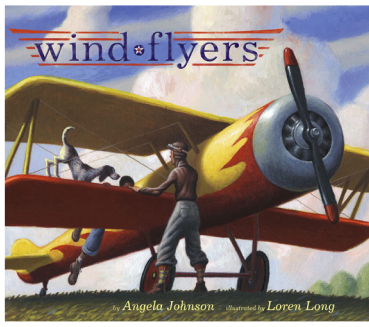


Limited representation in our sample is prevalent across most individual racial and ethnic groups. Black and Latino people make up a large share of our sample, and a third or more of people in those racial groups are given limited representation. Native American people have the largest proportion of complex representation, though there were only 10 in our sample of 280 people. About 72% of the 32 Asian people in our sample are given limited representation. The few Middle Eastern people centered in texts are mostly limited in representation.

FIGURE 3. Complexity of representation for people of color by racial and ethnic identity



PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE OFTEN LIMITED IN REPRESENTATION BASED ON THE IMPACT THEY HAVE ON THE EVENTS OR STORY AROUND THEM



While beautifully illustrated, young readers should understand that the Tuskegee airmen's struggles were orchestrated by unjust laws.

GRADES
K-2

PEOPLE
Limited

GROUPS
Limited

TOPICS
Limited

A lack of agency can limit the representation of a person who may otherwise be portrayed complexly. *Wind Flyers* is the beautifully illustrated story of a Tuskegee airman who flew in World War II. The reader learns about this character's love for flying and the enthusiasm that lifted him into the skies.

However, the reader is not privy to any of the decisions the character wrestled with along his journey and the consequences of his important role in history are left implicit: "'Air Force didn't want us at first. Only four squadrons like us,' he says, touching his mahogany face."

Positive portrayals like this one of the unnamed "Great Uncle" in *Wind Flyers* are incredibly valuable, but children should also have stories that ground characters through their decision-making. Beyond the value for engaging readers, students should recognize the struggles that characters go through and that drive plot as they analyze literary elements. Readers should also understand that the struggle was not of the character's own making, but was one orchestrated by unfair and unjust laws. The simple statement, "Only four squadrons like us," should not be left to a child's wondering as to why those squadrons were not welcomed.

64%

**of people with limited representation
LACK AGENCY**



Section 3: Culture

How do students see groups and cultures?

Although our society is becoming increasingly diverse, schools are often segregated, leaving so much of a student's understanding about other groups and cultures up to how they are represented in books. Unfortunately, representations of groups and of cultures can be narrowed by superficial forms of inclusion and an appeal to the implicit audience of White readers that authors often have in mind, or what Toni Morrison referred to as the effect of the White gaze.³⁵

To explore the complexity of groups and cultures, we looked at whether the books in our sample avoided **stereotyping**, **immersed** people of color in culture, and portrayed groups and cultures of color as **assets** and as **equally valuable** to one another. Tools used to assess representation demonstrate a particular concern that when groups and cultures are made visible, they are too often presented negatively using stereotypes, biased language, or as dependent on others, such as a White savior. If students are to be exposed to the complexity of other cultures, that means placing individuals in the assets of culture and cultural practices.

Question	Are people, groups, and cultures of color represented without stereotypes ?	Are people of color immersed in groups and cultures?	Are groups and cultures presented positively or as assets ?	Are multiple groups and cultures portrayed as equally valuable ?
Indicators	Does the book avoid including superficial representation?	Are people of color connected to culture and does that connection extend to others to present a shared culture?	Are groups of color portrayed positively and as assets?	Are groups of color portrayed in relationship to other groups and as equally valuable?

The ways a text may represent groups and cultures, based on the indicators above, align to three categories:

Complex	Partial	Limited
People are immersed in culture, and groups are not stereotyped, are positively described, and are shown as equally valuable to others	Groups are not stereotyped, are not negatively described, and are not shown as less valuable than others	Groups are stereotyped, are negatively described, or are shown as less valuable than others



COMPLEX

The reader is a witness to the hopes and nurturing community around a family and their newborn baby through a Navajo tradition.



PARTIAL

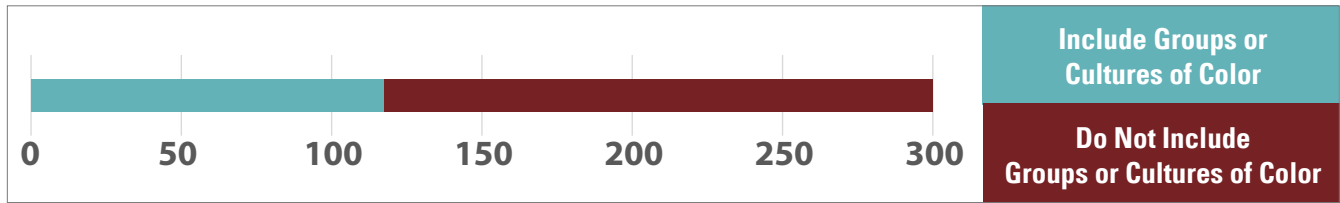
Values and cultural practices from Haida culture are positively described but without any connection to the people at the center of that culture.



LIMITED

A detailed description of the multigenerational practice of weaving is enriched by Spanish translation but situated in a "treasure from trash" storyline, where the value of weaving depends on the interests of White tourists.

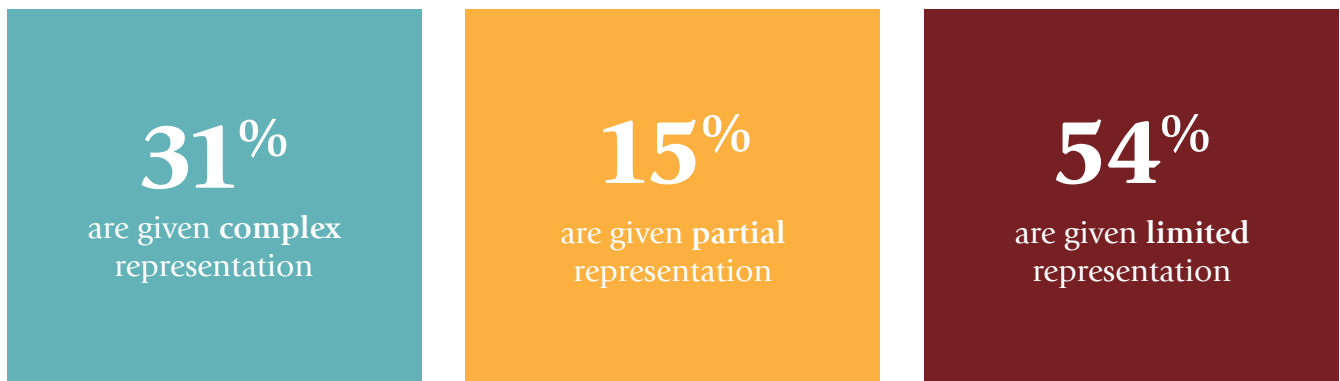
Less than half of the texts in our sample (39%) include groups or cultures of color



GROUPS AND CULTURES OF COLOR ARE OFTEN GIVEN LIMITED REPRESENTATION

Across the 300 books we reviewed, 118 include groups or cultures of color. When we examined how groups of color are represented in texts, we found more than half of the time, they are given limited representation.

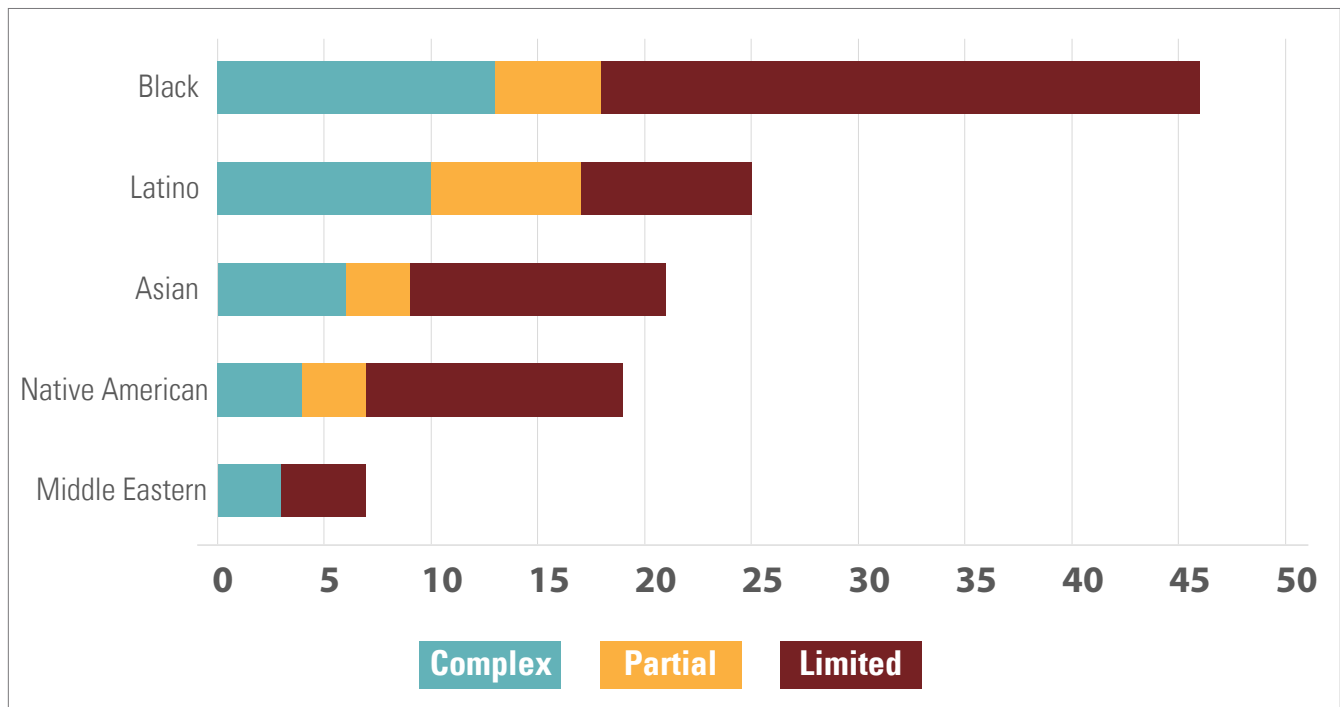
In the book *Endangered*, Sophie, who has a White father and Congolese mother, guides the elementary or middle-school reader through an understanding of the Congolese people that is heavily dependent on marginalizing tropes that emphasize poverty and disease. The book culminates in a violent moment with a resolution that is dependent on White saviorism. Consider the view that a 10-year-old may have of the Congolese based on quotes like, “My dad had picked up a very African sense of humor during his years in Congo. Everyone here constantly laughed at tragedy, as if insulting misfortune would keep it at bay,” or “you couldn’t travel a few miles in Kinshasa without seeing a person dying on the side of the road.”³⁶ These false generalizations are asserted as fact and influence the perception that a reader will develop of an entire country. This not only produces a negative perception of a group of people across readers, but it also hinders the intellectual development of the individual reader, replacing nuance and intrigue with a myopic view of a country the student may never visit and of people with whom the student may never interact.



A negative perception of a group of people hinders the intellectual development of the reader, replacing nuance and intrigue with a myopic view of people with whom the student may never interact

High rates of limited representation are an issue for every group of color identified in our sample. Although Latino and Middle Eastern groups or cultures have the highest proportions of texts that provide complex representation, that accounts for only 13 total books out of the 300 in our sample. That count is especially small given that 28 books in our sample include Black groups or cultures alongside limited representation.

FIGURE 4. Complexity of representation for groups of color by racial and ethnic identity

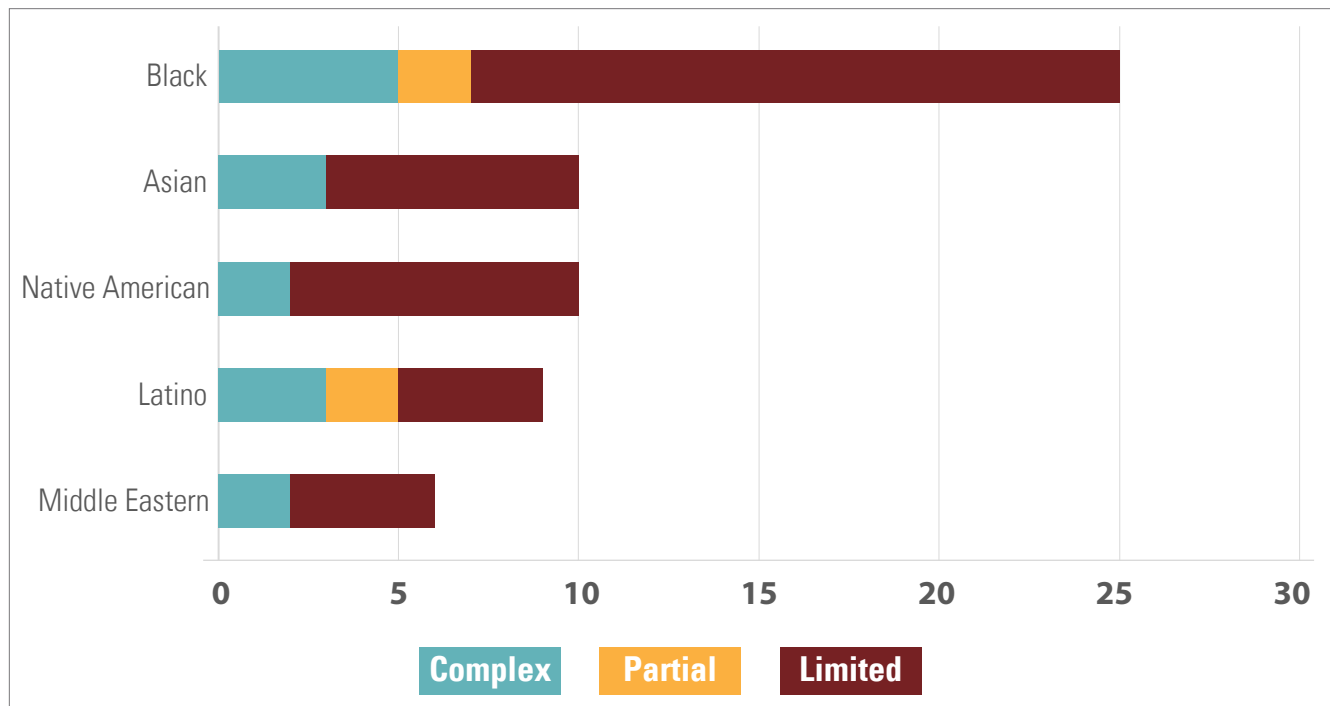


WHITE AUTHORS RARELY PORTRAY COMPLEX CULTURES OF COLOR

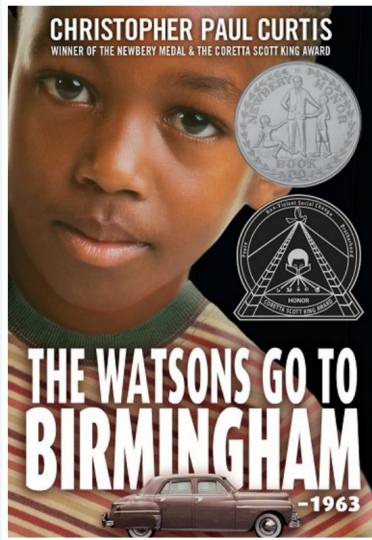
We took into consideration how White authors portray groups of color, because White authors write most ELA texts. Of the 64 books in our sample that include groups or cultures with limited representation, 41 of them have at least one author who is White. Of the 36 books in our sample that contain groups or cultures with complex representation, only 15 have at least one author who is White.

One such example of a White author giving a limited representation to a group of color is in *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech. The central character, Sal, is a White girl on a journey of self-discovery that is deeply tied to her belief that she and her mother have Native American ancestry. Sal dons and casts aside this Native American identity as it suits her, just as Creech does by inserting ancillary Native American characters that convey Creech’s view on topics affecting Native American people. Sal conveniently talks to one such character who asserts that Native American people should be called American Indian. Creech’s characterization of Native American people is shaped by a romantic view of Native American people, a view she admitted to having “without apology” in her Newberry Medal acceptance speech.³⁷

FIGURE 5. Complexity of representation for people of color by racial and ethnic identity in books that include at least one White author or illustrator



GROUPS OF COLOR ARE OFTEN LIMITED IN REPRESENTATION BECAUSE OF THE USE OF STEREOTYPES



In this historical fiction book, a Black family witnesses the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of 1963, and the reader confronts the resounding effect of that terrorist act. Nonetheless, the story includes stereotypes about poverty and uses language like “Indians circling wagons,” “hillbilly,” and other terms that negatively depict Native Americans and White people. Though infrequent, these stereotypes are important to recognize as elements of this otherwise powerful story.

GRADES
3-8

PEOPLE
Complex

GROUPS
Limited

TOPICS
Complex

Stereotypes can limit the representation of groups that may otherwise be portrayed complexly. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is a work of historical fiction that follows a lower-middle-class Black family as they travel from their home of Flint, Michigan to visit family in Alabama.

While in Birmingham, the characters witness the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of 1963. The characters and the reader are forced to confront the resounding effect of that terrorist act. Kenny, the book’s protagonist, and his family are immersed in culture and are portrayed complexly through faults and assets.

Nonetheless, the story includes stereotypes about poverty and uses stereotyping language like “Indians circling wagons,” “cracker,” “red neck,” “hillbilly,” and others to describe Native Americans and White people. Although stereotypes are infrequent, they are nevertheless troubling, so it’s important to recognize them as elements of this otherwise incredibly powerful story.

86%

of texts with limited representation include
STEREOTYPES of groups or cultures

Section 4: Topics

How do students see historical social topics?

A valuable component of representation that extends beyond individuals and groups is how diverse perspectives and ideas are portrayed. The historical and social topics of books are the contexts through which students learn about others and are exposed to the diversity of thought that prepares them to be critical thinkers and civic participants. As James Baldwin stated, “The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.”³⁸ Limited exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives can leave students less prepared for the critical thinking required as they continue their educational journeys, and more importantly, it keeps them from authentically engaging with the past as they shape their present and future. Seemingly simple choices can have profound impact, such as the choice a few years ago in a McGraw-Hill textbook to describe slavery as simply one pattern of immigration that brought workers from Africa to America.³⁹

In our review, we looked at whether historical issues are **sanitized**, if topics are discussed through a marginalized **perspective**, and if discussions of social topics are **connected** to the tangible and real experiences of students. Tools for assessing representation frequently include some assessment of imbalances in how our collective social story is told in curriculum, whether it be through a singular ideological perspective, a whitewashing of history, or as a perpetuation of a status quo. If students are to be prepared to solve the complex problems they will confront as adult citizens, their education should prepare them as critical thinkers skilled to engage with and analyze diverse perspectives.

Question	Are historical or social topics presented without sanitization ?	Are topics presented through perspectives that include those given marginalized identities?	Is there a connection between topic presentations and the real experiences of students?
Indicators	Is the reader presented with a version of a social or historical issue that has not been sanitized?	Is a topic presented through multiple perspectives that include a marginalized perspective?	Is a topic presented as complex, as an issue of the past and present, or as linked to structures like laws and historical events?

The ways a topic may be represented, based on the indicators above, align to three categories:

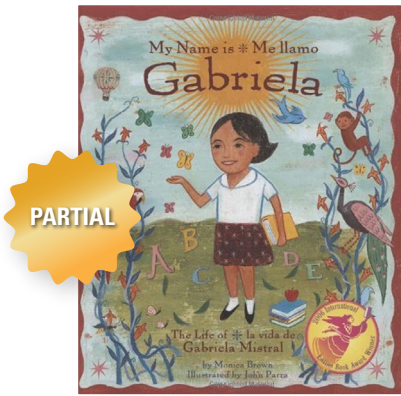
Complex	Partial	Limited
Topics are not sanitized, include at least one marginalized perspective, and demonstrate a complex connection	Topics are not sanitized but may be represented ambiguously in terms of perspective and connection	Topics are sanitized or are presented without a marginalized perspective or complex connection



The denial of education to girls and women is shown as an enactment of societal structure through government policies and violent enforcement.

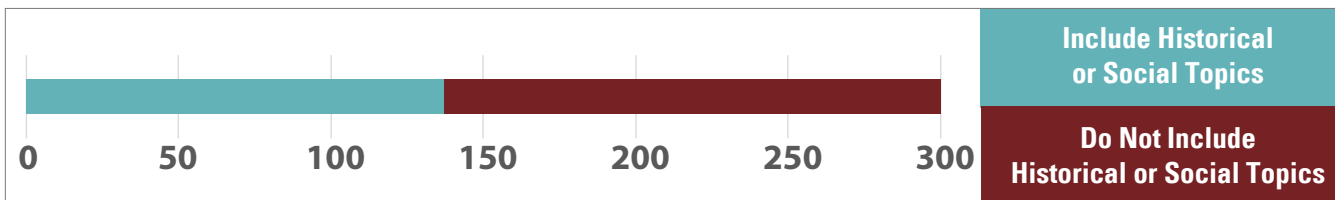


Legal segregation is framed as an individual problem—as people thinking “black people and white people should not be friends,” which can be solved if we are kind to one another.



Gabriela Mistral broke barriers as the first Nobel-Prize winning Latina woman, but those barriers remain hidden in this story.

Less than half of the texts in our sample (46%) include historical or social topics



HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL TOPICS ARE OFTEN SANITIZED OR DISCONNECTED FROM STUDENT REALITIES

Of the 137 texts that include historical or social topics, an overwhelming majority give them limited representation. Several books sanitize historical moments. Books can sanitize by minimizing past harms, such as the case of *Blood on the River: James Town, 1607* (grades 3-8). In that story, the damage of colonialization is glossed over in the adventures of an English boy and his assistantship to the heroic figure of John Smith. Books can sanitize by focusing on a figure's accomplishments without acknowledging the barriers they faced, such as the case in *Alvin Ailey* (grades 3-5) and *Misty Copeland (You Should Meet Series)* (grades K-2). Stories can also sanitize by avoiding direct discussion with historical events, such as in the young children's picture book, *Islandborn*, where an enormous bat-like monster threateningly hovers over fleeing islanders. The figure represents the Rafael Trujillo dictatorship of the Dominican Republic, but children are robbed of an opportunity to consider and connect the description and imagery of fleeing characters with real people or structures. Children's books also often assert a singular perspective on social issues and frame complex issues through individual responses. Books that deal with environmental issues, for example, are often focused on an individual's role, casting the light of responsibility, and student understanding of environmental issues, away from corporate and political responsibility.

16%

are given complex
representation

4%

are given partial
representation

80%

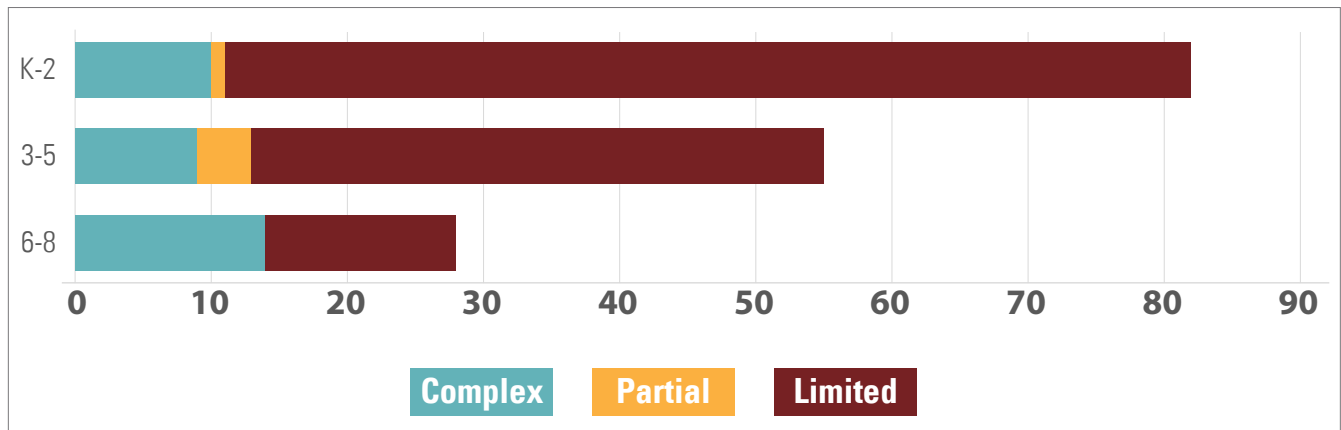
are given limited
representation



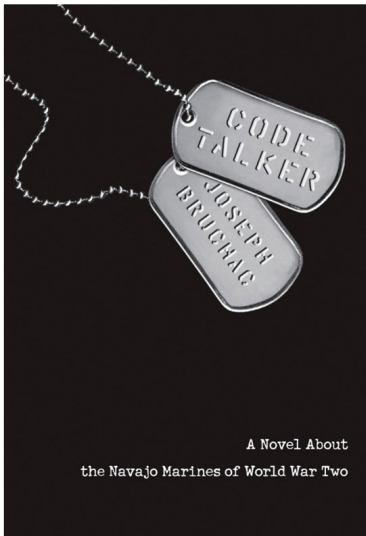
High rates of limited representation are an issue across grade levels, revealing what we identify as “intellectual condescension.” Frequently, historical and social topics are presented superficially and in ways that conflict with the expectations for student analysis, cognitive demand, and intellectual curiosity. Such texts give the impression that complex issues — such as pollution or racism — are easily solved through individual acts of human decision-making and acts of kindness, rather than showing the intersections of systemic behavior, policy, and practices. Or, ideas are presented as disconnected and detached from history. As outlined in the Common Core Standards, which many teachers use in one form or another,⁴⁰ third grade students are expected to describe relationships between historical events, and in sixth grade, they are to analyze and cite evidence for argumentation. Yet, half of the texts that include historical or social topics in grades 6-8 — after students have been expected to develop skills in analysis and argumentation — provide limited representation of those historical and social topics. This imbalance offers students few opportunities to analyze issues from multiple angles, also hindering their ability to reach the demands of literary skills required in this grade band. Of course, topics will be tailored to different age groups, but it is clear from books like *Nasreen’s Secret School* and *We Are Water Protectors* that even the youngest readers can be exposed to complex presentations of topics that challenge them, rather than condescend to them.

MOST BOOKS ACROSS ALL GRADE LEVELS GIVE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL TOPICS LIMITED REPRESENTATION

FIGURE 6. Complexity of representation for books that include a historical or social topic by grade level band



HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL TOPICS ARE OFTEN LIMITED IN REPRESENTATION BECAUSE THEY ARE SANITIZED



Code Talker is a novel about the Navajo Marines of World War II and the Navajo-language-based code they used to confound Axis powers. However, the main character frequently dismisses the influence of personal and systemic discrimination, asserting that these are necessary aspects of Native American patriotism.

GRADES
6-8

PEOPLE
Complex

GROUPS
Limited

TOPICS
Limited

Sanitization can limit the representation of a topic that may otherwise be portrayed complexly. *Code Talker* is a novel about the Navajo Marines of World War II and the importance of the Navajo-language-based code they used to confound Axis powers. Ned, the narrator, frequently raises points about the influence of systemic discrimination, such as by describing how schools stripped Native American students of cultural identity and how Native American military members were denied benefits like the GI Bill and federal housing funds.

However, Ned also frequently dismisses the influence of personal and systemic discrimination, asserting that these are necessary aspects of Native American patriotism. The value of Native American identity throughout the book is tied to the Navajo's unyielding service to the United States, and it's frequently made clear that anti-Americanism is not to be tolerated, despite the unequal treatment of the Navajo by the U.S. government and its people. Ned discusses how every Native American service member is called "chief" and even explains how after the war, while wearing his uniform, he is denied service in a bar. These examples are excused away because the Navajo are expected to persevere. They are expected to give up themselves in service to an American ideal.

68%

of texts with topics SANITIZE their presentation

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curricula developers have responded to calls for improved cultural relevance by adding stories with characters from diverse backgrounds, but without necessarily considering how people, groups, and topics are presented. We recommend the following to push the field from a narrow conception of diversity toward representational balance:

1. Challenge dominant norms and singular perspectives

Publishers may feel pressure from the movement to ban books and remove so-called critical race theory by trimming an already limited degree of curricula diversity. Many districts and schools have succumbed to that pressure and the legitimate threat of legal consequences, which has led to nearly 5,000 books being removed from classrooms.⁴¹ Given the dearth of books by authors of color in schools, any removal of texts impacts the availability of author, people, culture, and topic diversity and ultimately, curtails a child's innate intelligent curiosity.

2. Expand publisher and educator definitions of cultural relevance

Balanced representation requires curricula publishers and developers to ask broader questions. Attention must be given to the ways authors construct fictional characters, how they depict real people and cultures, and how they tell stories of historical and social significance. Although cultural relevance has been part of educational conversations and goals for more than four decades, it remains elusive, loosely defined, and narrowly depicted. At the curricula level, cultural relevance has mainly centered on quantitative measures of racial, ethnic, disability, and gender identification diversity when these characters are being depicted at all. Nevertheless, working toward balanced representations of people, cultures, and topics creates an access point for moving texts and units of study more authentically toward cultural relevance.

3. Ask a new set of questions about representation

Balanced representation requires new and more nuanced questions. Culture is complex, and being authentically relevant requires authors, publishers, and curricula developers to consider the questions we have put forth in this study:

- How are people (all groups) depicted in texts and across units of study?
 - Which people have agency, are complex, and have influence?
 - Which cultures have assets that are valuable?
 - Which cultures are fully represented and connected across texts?
 - Which cultures are dependent on other cultures or, alternatively, are allowed to be agents in their own development?
- How are historical or social topics depicted in texts and across units of study?
 - How is history depicted?
 - How are various groups' roles in history depicted?
 - How are students meant to understand the roles of individuals versus institutions in society?
- Are students treated as intellectually capable or are texts intellectually condescending as depicted by overly simplistic means of addressing complex social issues or historical facts?

4. Consider how texts sit in conversation with one another

It's easy to review a text, determine that representations are imbalanced, and make the decision to remove the text from the curricula. Researchers at Johns Hopkins Institute of Education Policy created knowledge-building heat maps of curricula to determine if curricula provide sufficient opportunities for students to build knowledge across the curriculum.⁴² As would be expected, they found various degrees of knowledge-building opportunities across the curriculum they evaluated. Their recommendations include expanding curricula to offer more opportunities instead of merely replacing one text with another. We recommend publishers and curriculum developers consider how texts sit in conversation with one another across a unit before deciding to remove a book, as removal is tantamount to censorship. While we understand there may be instances where text replacement is necessary, doing so should be a last resort.

- Are other texts in the unit balanced in their representations?
- Will students have opportunities to grapple with texts as they “sit in conversation” with other more balanced texts?
- In what instances is it necessary to remove and replace texts to achieve a more balanced representation of the people, cultures, and topics presented?

5. Expand educator choice in curated materials

In those places where educators are allowed to adjust the curriculum, publishers and district leaders need to provide guidance to ensure that educators have multiple options for engaging students and extending intellectual rigor. Those choices should allow educators to offer students opportunities to grapple with complex, high-quality texts that portray people, cultures, and topics through a balanced representation. Educators should also be provided support in pushing complex and nuanced understanding when texts inevitably portray imbalance through negative and incomplete representations.

6. Provide professional learning to all curriculum decision-makers, including authors and developers

Publishers have an opportunity to communicate a clear stance about the need for curricula to be high-quality as evidenced by texts that build knowledge, are standards-aligned, and that offer students significant chances to engage with complex representations. They also have an obligation to communicate with the authors whose books they use and developers who construct their units. Such communication should include their stance on their goals and professional learning to ensure units reflect balanced representations of people, cultures, and topics.

CONCLUSION

Our study shows that the all-too-common practice of marginalization in instructional materials is worsened by another practice of including people of color and diverse perspectives in narrow and limiting forms. As the public-school population is becoming increasingly more diverse — currently more than half of students are students of color — this does children a disservice.⁴³ Students of color learn about the world through White/Eurocentric, male dominated perspectives and through simplistic representations and negative stereotypes. These forms of representations stand in the way of opportunities for expanding the minds and enriching the experience of all students.

We conclude that attending to representational balance is an important way for publishers and educators to ensure students have access to culturally relevant materials. We also argue that numerical representation alone is an inadequate measure of cultural relevance. Seeing more people and characters of color on the page is important, but it's equally essential that they be fully realized and positively represented.

While we have centered publishers in the study, we recognize the implications for educators' decisions to choose their curricula. Any designation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) must include a category that explicitly addresses the representational balance of people, cultures, and topic complexity.

[Our online tool](#) offers decision-makers an opportunity to choose curricula that goes beyond superficial understandings of what it means to be culturally relevant. The questions highlighted by our tool may also help classroom educators expand and grow students' literacy skills by offering them a broader lens through which to engage learners in analyzing the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors that appear in all texts. Featuring more books and materials by authors of color and about people of color not only lets students of color see themselves represented in broad and expansive ways, but helps White students develop deeper understandings about their own racial and ethnic identity and the world around them as well. Understanding how people and cultures are depicted can also help *all* students develop essential analytical skills, which can improve academic outcomes. Students also need opportunities to build deeper knowledge and broader yet nuanced understanding about complex topics, which enhance critical thinking. In the end, all children deserve to be exposed to rich, diverse characters and cultures in books so they can grapple with complex issues and learn to problem-solve in an increasingly complex world.

Designation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) must include a category that explicitly addresses the representational balance of people, cultures, and topic complexity



Endnotes

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13. Although people of color are the focus of this analysis, the tool was designed to examine the representation of people, groups, and perspectives across social identities. We encourage users of the tool to examine representation as it relates to sexual orientation, gender identity, relationship to the carceral system, religious practices, and many other aspects of social identity.
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24. In our review of author biographies, we recognized that authors of color often reference their race or ethnicity and that White authors do not. There were 25 authors across 28 books who did not identify a race or ethnicity for themselves and for whom no other clear markers of race or ethnicity could be found.
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27. Several books had multiple authors or illustrators, so counts are not mutually exclusive. Each listed percentage reflects the number of books out of 300 with any author or illustrator with that identifiable race or ethnicity.
28. Over 5% of people centered in texts did not have a clearly identifiable race. 12 of the 15 books that had characters without clearly identifiable races were written by White authors.
29. Several books featured multiple people while others featured no people. Counts are not mutually exclusive. Each listed percentage reflects the number of books out of 300 with any featured person with that identifiable race or ethnicity.
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