

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



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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.

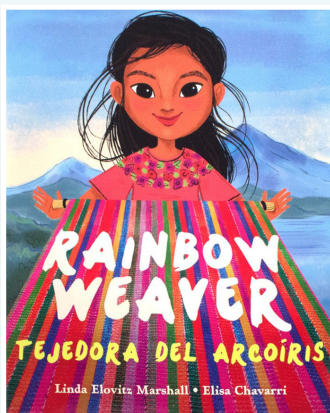
It can be difficult for any of us to see past our implicit biases, which is why we developed the Tool for Representational Balance in Books to give publishers, district leaders, educators, caregivers, students, and others a framework for deeply engaging in materials to assess representation in the books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

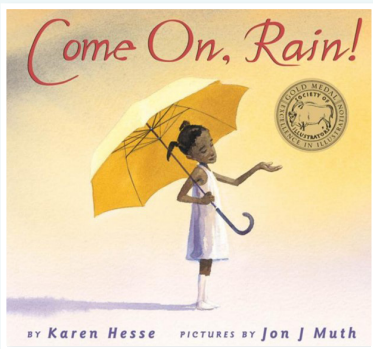
Less than one-third (31%) of the books that include groups of color provide what we define as complex representation



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

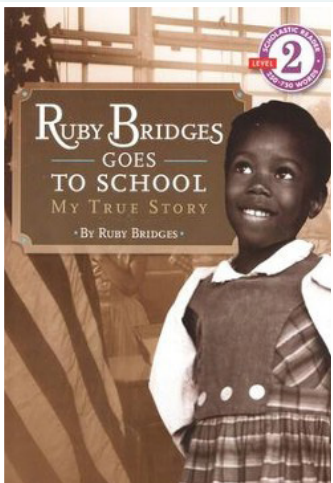
3. Ask a new set of questions about representation

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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