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edtrust

Calls for More Complexity in Children's Books

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Students Deserve More Stories, More Complexity, More Authors, and More Diversity in Publishing

A writing series that emphasizes the need to recognize how multiple and intersecting identities are represented in grade-school books.

By William Rodick, Ph.D.

In fall 2023, EdTrust published a report examining racial and ethnic representation in grade school books. This research revealed that the justifications behind book bans — that there is somehow too much diversity and too many perspectives in K-12 education — are patently false. In fact, in the relatively few cases where a person of color was featured in our review, they were often portrayed superficially and negatively. Research shows that students receive many academic, emotional, and social benefits from representationally diverse curricula, and as such, the push for diversity must consider the multiple, intersecting identities that students bring to the classroom.

Unfortunately, the limitations we found for racial and ethnic diversity are only worsened when we expand our scope to consider other aspects of identity, like household structure, immigration status, gender identity, or sexual orientation. For example, out of the 300 books we analyzed, we found only two LGBTQ+ characters. LGBTQ+ representation often follows one of a few reductive plotlines, where the story is about the character coming out, resisting bullying, or serving as the backdrop to a larger story. In Patient Zero, Michael (no last name given) moved to Los Angeles in 1980 to find a community of other gay men and pursue modeling, but his unusual medical symptoms introduce the story of how doctors grappled with the AIDS epidemic. The other LGBTQ+ character is Alvin Ailey. While the book describes his revolutionary techniques that blended ballet, modern dance, blues, and gospel music and the creation of his dance troupe that were influenced by African American culture, there is no reference that Ailey was gay, illustrating how intersections of identity, even biographical ones, can be completely erased.

We offer a writing series that emphasizes this need to recognize how multiple and intersecting identities are represented in grade school books. This series extends the lessons from our report by highlighting a group of incredible authors, each of whom speaks about their experiences navigating identity and representation to help readers understand what is needed now to advocate on behalf of their respective communities.

Children bring all of themselves to their learning, and that learning should be as nuanced and complex as the human experience. That variety is valuable and benefits us all, not just in how we learn, but also in how we commune with one another, how we work and think together, and how we collectively nurture and shape a democratic, pluralistic society. What is a school if not a place to explore questions students have about their lives and the world around them? As one author, Sam Long, explains how he wrestled with one of those questions as a transgender person, "I knew I wasn't like most girls, and I knew that I wanted to be a boy, but I wasn't sure if there was a word for that. I searched the cover art and the synopses for hints of what I could feel hidden in me." While Sabrina Wesley-Nero ruminates on the messages being conveyed about education and the society we want for our children through a lens of social justice.

There are too few options for children seeking answers to their questions about who they are, as individuals, and across the many communities in which they exist in the world around them. This is especially harmful when those few options are pulled from library shelves, inaccessible even though a select few agitators are driving this movement, while most parents oppose the bigoted culling of books from classrooms and libraries.

Book bans across the country are rooted in a historical strategy of discrimination that is about denying access to public spaces and equal opportunities by shutting out the stories that help students feel seen and understood, classifying those stories as unworthy of instruction.

As AJ Link writes about finding opportunities for accessing Black and Autistic representation, he discusses how access is not just about physical space, but also about the precursors to accessing spaces, be it emotional access, relational access, and financial access.

Our report on curriculum representation and its associated tool reveals a need to expand our collective discussion about what we should expect from diverse and inclusive representation in grade school books. It is not enough to include more people of color, especially if depictions of people of color are stereotypical or negatively portrayed. Educators and publishers must instead consider how complex those depictions are and then use that information as a basis for pushing student thinking.

I am excited for how this series will move the conversation forward about what it means for education and books to be representative, inclusive, and beneficial to student learning. I hope you find these pieces, along with a plethora of resources and book recommendations, valuable as we collectively work toward finding or publishing materials that better reflect the real lives and experiences of all students.

EdTrust advocates for empowering and rigorous curricula and instruction. Through the Alliance for Resource Equity, EdTrust, along with Education Resource Strategies, has created tools to help communities follow a roadmap for change, including curricula decision making guidance, a guidebook for identifying district challenges and next steps, and case-making decks to help advocates convey the messages to relevant audiences.

Additionally, EdTrust's Tool for Representational Balance in Books was created to provide users a framework for closely reviewing children's books so they may better understand how people, groups, and topics are represented. EdTrust used this tool to review children's books and found that people of color are too often stereotyped and social and historical topics are too often superficial in their presentation. In recognizing that complex and accurate representation is further limited through restrictions on books and the teaching of honest history, EdTrust has led a campaign against book bans — the award-winning Can't Be Erased, which includes additional tools and resources for taking action.

Each piece in this series is accompanied by relevant resources and book recommendations provided by one of our partners, with input from the authors.

More Intersections: Why We Need Afro-Latino Representation in Children's Books

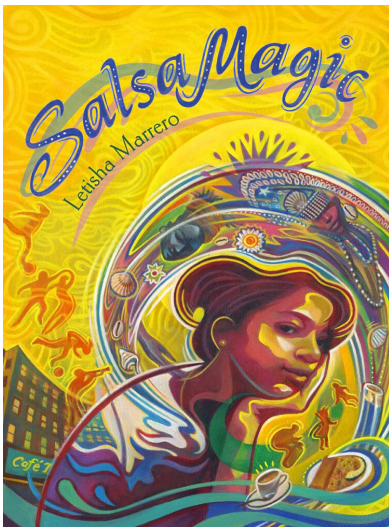
Latinos deserve to have books to which they can relate and aspire. Non-Latinos should learn about rich, diverse cultures.

By Letisha Marrero

"What ARE you?" That was the number one question I was asked growing up. Several decades ago, the only reference point most Californians had for Latinos was Mexico, and with my curly hair, olive skin, dark eyes, and African American features, I didn't fit the description. Was I a light-skinned Black girl? Maybe. Basically, back then, no one really knew what a Puerto Rican was. To be honest, I didn't either.

As a child, I was a voracious reader, gobbling up books by Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, and Roald Dahl. While I adored these authors and their stories, there was something that I just couldn't fully relate to in characters like Deenie, Ramona, or James (though I do love peaches). And 20-something years later, after I had returned to my Nuyorican roots and later became a mom, I found that not much had changed in the literary world: Almost all the children's books I sought out for my child centered whiteness — with the exception of the occasional adorable animal, like Olivia the pig.

As a writer, I wanted to change that.



When coming up with a story, I usually start with the question, "What if?" So, after my son became obsessed with the World of Hogwarts, I asked myself, "What if Harry Potter were Latina?" That spawned my middle-grade novel, *Salsa Magic*. My main character, Maya Beatriz Calderon Montenegro, is Afro-Latina and Mexican — two cultures I straddled between as a kid in San Diego and an adult in New York City. She is everything that I wanted to be as a child: brave, pretty, confident, precocious, and sassy. She comes from a loud, loving Latino family who own a bustling café — and many of those characters were inspired by my myriad first, second, and third cousins in New York.

I wanted young Latinos to have characters to whom they could relate and aspire. And I wanted non-Latinos learn about a rich, diverse culture different than their own, but that is still relatable with universal ties to family and all the beautiful mess that comes with it.

Afro-Latinidad is its own category — representing 12% of the Latino population. And in fact, the Office of Management and Budget has recently made changes to the way that all federal agencies collect race and ethnicity data, in hopes of making it easier for groups like Afro-Latinos to report their race AND Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. Our identity is unique because of our roots: After "discovering" the Caribbean islands (which had been inhabited for 4,000 years prior), the Spanish colonizers decimated the native Taíno, and brought with them enslaved people from Africa to work the land and would then take the riches back to Spain. This was known as the Triangle Trade System. As such, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans are a blend of Spanish, Taíno, and African blood — in varying degrees. Among this mestizaje, there is a not-so-silent caste system, where lighter skin is revered, and darker skin is considered a detriment. In *Salsa Magic,* I purposely describe different characters with different skin tones — from café con leche to trigueño (wheat) — to showcase the diversity among Afro-Latinos, even within one's own family. Additionally, I describe an array of body types, from bien

mujer (womanly) to bien gordita (good chubby) and flaca (skinny). You'll also read about varied hair textures—loose curls, tight curls, Afros, braids and blowouts. These are all part of the diaspora and show that Latinos are anything but a monolith.

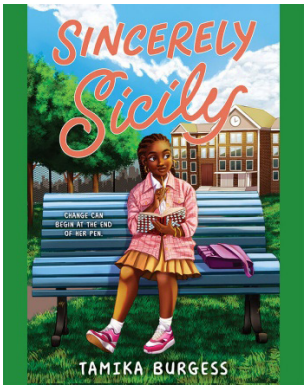
When we talk about racial and cultural representation in children's books, publishers and educators need to know that there must be authentic experiences in reading materials that are relatable to children in order to be effective and have meaning as they learn to read. A child being able to say something like, "My abuela is just like that!" or "I love platanos too!" is a powerful statement and feeling. And I've seen this effect firsthand: on one school visit, the sole Latina at an all-Black girl grade school lit up when I was reading aloud, like I was speaking just to her. And the Black girls relished when the time came to salsa dance to the sounds based on the African beat, known as el clave. I got just as much out of the girls as they did of me — because *that's* what representation not only looks like, but acts like.

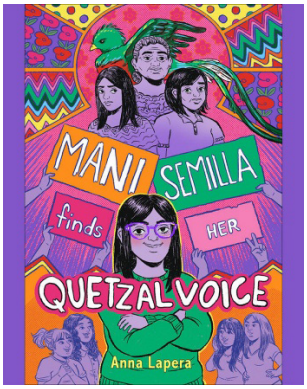
Relevant Resources

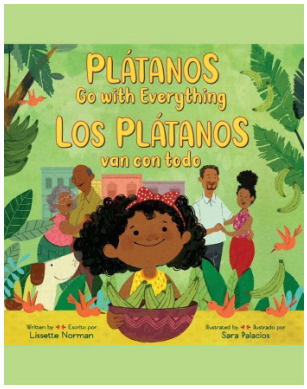
Las Musas

In addition to being the author of *Salsa Magic*, Letisha Marrero is EdTrust's editorial director, and a member of Las Musas, a collective of Latina women and otherwise marginalized people whose gender identity aligns with femininity, writing and/or illustrating in traditional children's literature. Their mission is to spotlight the new contributions of Las Musas in the evolving canon of children's literature and celebrate the diversity of voice, experience, and power in our communities. Lasmusasbooks.com features a wide variety of young adult, middle-grade, and picture books written or illustrated by Latina authors for you to explore.

Book Recommendations







The Mores of Muslim Representation in Children's Books

There are almost 2 billion Muslims around the world, but represent only 1% of the youth literature published.

By Ariana Hussain, MLIS, and Mahasin Abuwi Aleem, MLIS

Mahasin's Story

It took almost four decades for me to see my life experience represented in a book.

In April 2018, I was a 38-year-old married mother of three when I first saw myself and my family affirmed in a book. *Mommy's Khimar* is a children's book that playfully explores a young Black Muslim girl's fascination with her mother's headscarves and tells the story of her family and community's support of her as a person, including the support and love of her Christian grandmother. The moment of discovery and reflection brought tears to my eyes — I didn't realize that it had been missing until I found it. Growing up at a time when *Sweet Valley High* and *The Hardy Boys* were most popular, I never considered a world where an African American Muslim family would be included in a book that I could grab off a library or bookstore shelf and take home with me.

There are almost 2 billion Muslims around the world, but according to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, only 1% of the youth literature books reviewed annually by the center, published in the U.S. in a given year, depict Muslim representation of any kind.

A 2014 Pew Research Center study found that the majority of people in the United States say they do not know a Muslim. For many, what they know about Muslims comes from the distorted windows of media misrepresentation.

Recent studies and reports by the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and the Media Portrayals of Minorities Project (MPoMP) at Middlebury College have laid bare the truth that the dominant narratives and portrayals of Muslims in the U.S. Media are negative and that Muslims are the most negatively portrayed American group of color in this country, directly leading to Islamophobia and violence faced by Muslim individuals and communities.

These portrayals have profound repercussions on the well-being of Muslims. According to a 2020 study by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), half of Muslim families surveyed reported incidents of bullying targeting their children's faith, with a third attributing the bullying to teachers or school officials.

Common Sense Media's Inclusion Imperative: Why Media Representation Matters for Kids' Ethnic-Racial Development report examines the role of media representation in the ethnic-racial development of children in both understanding themselves and others. Their findings on Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim Representation in Screen Media, indicate that higher quality depictions of Muslims lead to decreased support from white audiences for policies that negatively impact Muslim Americans and their families, and for Muslim American audiences, lead to increased perceptions of safety and belonging.

Ariana's Story

As a Muslim Indonesian Okinawan American, I have not expected that my exact experience would be depicted on the pages of children's books, yet my feelings for books that depict Islam and Muslim American experiences that capture parts of my identity but not others, are bittersweet.

Indonesians are the fourth largest population in the world, and the most populous Muslim country— over 80% of its population is Muslim, which represents 13 % of the global Muslim population. In the U.S., Pew estimates that as of 2019 there are about 129,000 Indonesian Americans, the 15th largest group of Asian Americans and one that is fast growing. This population is diverse, reflecting many ethnicities and religions, with a minority Muslim population of about 25%.

There are few examples of Indonesian/Indonesian American representation in children's books, let alone Indonesian American Muslims. But looking at global representation it is still surprising to see little representation in children's literature in U.S. publishing or of translated books. If Indonesia or Indonesians are depicted in a storyline, it is only an incidental mention, without detailed religious or cultural practice. Until just this month, the closest reflection of my identity that I have seen is *Mommy Sayang* by Rosana Sullivan, a book about a little girl and her mother living in a small Malaysian village.

Aisha's Colors by Nabila Adani, a book about a family vacation, set in Jakarta and the Javanese countryside, and published by Candlewick was just published in September of this year.

The esteemed educator, Rudine Sims Bishop, often referred to as the "mother of multicultural literature," whose literary framework references books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, wrote: "When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience."

Our Work

We established Hijabi Librarians in 2018, after many years of working to find Muslim colleagues in youth librarianship and discussing Muslim representation in the field and literature. Our early conversations as a collective of Muslim librarians inevitably turned to our experiences with books. When had any of us ever seen ourselves, our families, and our communities represented in literature?

Our answers were the same: We had not. For us, the work is personal.

Our Collective Work: Challenging the Status Quo and Reframing Narratives

Since launching the Hijabi Librarians collective in 2018, our work has been focused on:

1. Advocating for inclusive literature that represents the rich reality of Muslims and Islamic practice, as the complexity of what it means to be Muslim varies from individual to individual based on not only the degree of religious practice but also the other multitude of social identities held, as well as the histories of how those identities have been affected by an equally complex factors (e.g., culture, geography, imperialism, colonialism, sexism, etc.)
2. Interrogating the quality of the representation of Islam and Muslims in youth literature.
3. Providing tools to evaluate books and assist librarians and educators to discover intellectually vibrant, intersectional narratives that will be shared in libraries and classrooms.

4. Encouraging what Dr. Muhammad has termed as "criticality:" "The capacity and ability to read, write, think, and speak in ways to understand power and equity in order to understand and promote anti-oppression."

Our toolkit is applicable, and useful, for anyone striving to thoughtfully select works of literature that engage the full spectrum of the Muslim experience — especially educators.

To quote Professor Muhammad again, "Not only is it important to teach youths who they are, but educators should also teach students about the identities and cultures of others different from them. When we have true, clear, and complete understandings about people different from us, we are less inclined to hate, show bias, or hold false views of others."

Understanding Muslims — as multi-faceted human beings and as members of complex, diverse communities — combats reductive representation which often conflates and flattens the experiences of Islam and Muslims and other religious groups, such as Sikhs, whose religious practices are religiously conflated with Muslims, or discussions of the political landscape in Southwest Asia and North Africa that erase the area's rich Christian history and that of other religious communities.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Ultimately, the stories about Muslims that have been and continue to be published are important and add to the canon of children's literature but cannot capture all the stories of children in any one classroom.

Holidays are just one opportunity for teachers, students, and families to bring narratives of Muslims into schools and communities. We hope that as more children's books with Muslim subjects are published the nuances of multilayered identity will be further explored.

We will continue to work toward advocating for inclusion of Muslims from stories, authors, and publishers in children's and young adult books that showcase the full humanity of Muslim youth in all media with faith, love, and pride — because better Muslim representation and understanding are connected to the liberation of all.

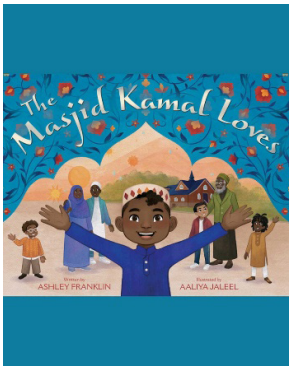
Ariana Hussain, MLIS and Mahasin Abuwi Aleem, MLIS are co-founders of Hijabi Librarians and authors of the Evaluating Muslims in KidLit Toolkit.

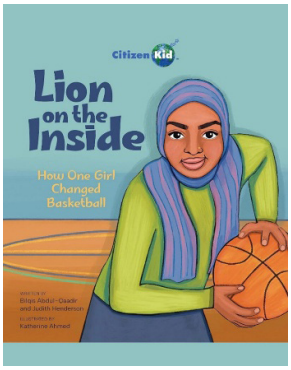
Relevant Resources

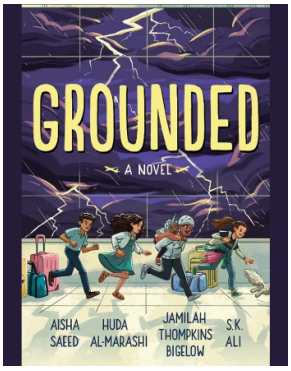
Islamic Networks Group

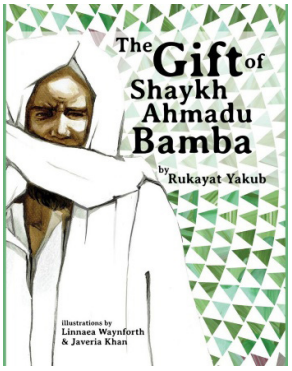
Dr. Jamillah Karim is an award-winning author, speaker, blogger, former Professor of Religion at Spelman College, and consultant for the Islamic Networks Group (ING). ING is a nonprofit organization educating for cultural literacy and mutual respect with affiliates and partners around the country that are pursuing peace and countering all forms of bigotry through education and interfaith engagement in schools and different organizations. Educators and organizations can connect to guest speakers as well as use ING's online curriculum guides on a variety of topics related to cultural awareness and building bridges.

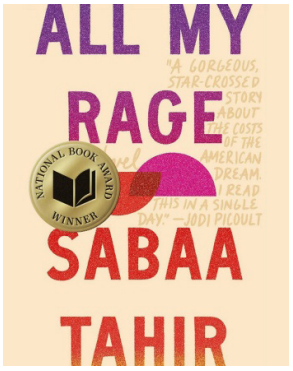
Book Recommendations

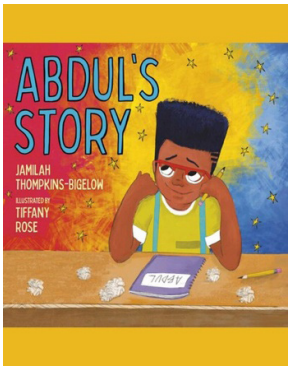












More Authentic and Complex Transgender Representation in Children's Books

LGBTQ books for children help students understand diverse gender identities, experiences, and families. They need authentic representation.

By Sam Long

I remember the summer after eighth grade when I noticed a new bookshelf marked "LGBT" at my local library. That afternoon, I spent 45 minutes standing *near* that shelf before I felt sure that nobody was looking at me. I finally tiptoed over to the LGBTQ+ bookshelf and started scanning the titles.

I knew I wasn't like most girls, and I knew that I wanted to be a boy, but I wasn't sure if there was a word for that. I searched the cover art and the synopses for hints of what I could feel hidden in me. Was I the only one who felt more complete in cargo shorts than capris? Were there any other kids who felt like boys, but didn't like sports? And now, I'm a teacher — Mr. Long, high school science teacher in Denver, Colorado.

Today, LGBTQ+ titles occupy multiple shelves in the children's and young adult sections of many libraries, and young people can even use reading apps like Sora or Libby to access content privately. But what stories are available to students with questions about their gender identity or sexual orientation? When transgender identities are portrayed in children's books, what do children learn about themselves from those characters?

Portraying Gender Identity

In the widely popular picture book, *I Am Jazz* by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, Jazz proclaims, "I have a girl brain but a boy body. This is called transgender." Though Jazz has interests that are atypical of her assigned sex, the presentation of her interests and of her transgender identity are binary — she only liked princesses and never trucks, and this is presented as evidence of her "girl brain." The additional justification of "I was born this way!" does not leave room for the many transgender individuals whose identity or feelings change during their lifetime. When I look at the transgender stories told in children's books, I see many that take a single, often narrow view of what it looks and feels like to be trans, and they miss an opportunity to present more options.

A broader and more inclusive definition of transgender is found in *When Aidan Became A Brother* by Kyle Lukoff, which features a kid who doesn't act how people expect girls to act. Family members acknowledge that there are many ways to be a girl, but since Aidan "didn't feel like *any* kind of girl," Aidan understands he is transgender. The reader sees Aidan undergoing a transition that includes a name change, room redecorating, and new clothes. Aidan even looks forward to becoming a big brother as his mom is pregnant.

Some books model the exploration of gender identity. Can a person be neither a boy nor a girl? In *Simply Skye* by Pamela Morgan, a kid named Avi uses a doll, who is not a boy or a girl, to explain their nonbinary identity to their family. Maia Kobabe, a nonbinary author who uses ey/em/eir pronouns, expands on the dynamic complexity of identity in the graphic novel memoir *Gender Queer*. Kobabe retells their journey involving many changes to gender identity, presentation, and feelings spanning from childhood through 20s. Although this is just one person's story, it sends a message to readers that it's natural to be unsure about who you are.

Diverse Bodies

In the picture book *What Makes a Baby*, sex educator Cory Silverberg explains that it takes a sperm and an egg to make a baby, and the baby grows in a uterus — some bodies make the egg, some bodies make the sperm, and some bodies have a uterus. The story applies equally to children who were adopted or conceived using reproductive technology or surrogacy. By decoupling gender from body parts, Silverberg makes the story of reproduction accessible to all readers. Their follow-up book for middle schoolers is titled *You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things*. Books like this offer youth an essential primer on navigating hormones, reproduction, development, power, pleasure, and boundaries. They give transgender youth the chance to grow up with confidence and self-assurance rather than shame and confusion.

The trait of body fat is addressed without shame in *Every Body: A First Conversation about Bodies* by Megan Madison and Jessica Ralli. The picture book illustrates diverse human bodies and reads, "Every body has fat. Fat is beautiful and important. It's one way that our bodies store energy. We all have different amounts of fat, and our bodies keep the fat in different places." This is a powerful message for transgender individuals because visible fat distribution is often associated with gender attribution.

Diverse Families

Gender transition does not need to be the focus of every story, and sometimes it is valuable to show trans characters as members of families. In *Different Kinds of Fruit* by Kyle Lukoff, the main character's dad is a post-transition trans man. In *Grace Needs Space!* by Benjamin A. Wilgus and Rii Abrego, the protagonist has divorced parents called Ma (mom) and Ba, who uses the honorific Mx. Representation of diverse families is important for young readers who will use the books that they read to develop an idea of what kinds of families are "normal."

Indeed, narrow concepts of gender identity and family structures are especially limiting as students learn more about animal biology in their science classes. In *It's a Wild World* by S. Bear Bergman, a group of children enjoy a zoo tour of animals whose behaviors resemble human patterns of gay, bisexual, and transgender identity — male seahorses give birth, parrotfish change sex from female to male, and bearded dragons with male chromosome pairs lay eggs. These true and common animal variations reinforce the understanding that diversity is a part of nature. Once young people come to expect that gender and sexual diversity are naturally occurring and found almost everywhere, then they can begin to understand how each sort of family, behavior, or anatomical structure has a function and a physiological basis.

Authenticity for Transgender Characters

To transition and to live authentically as my gender was an act of agency, and many books portray real trans people taking agency over their bodies, their presentation, and even their place in society. *If You're A Kid Like Gavin* by Gavin Grimm and Kyle Lukoff tells the story of a young trans man who proved that his school had violated his constitutional rights — a decision that was upheld in the Supreme Court. *Ho'onani: Hula Warrior* by Heather Gale and Mika Song tells the story of a Native Hawaiian kid who feels in between a girl and a boy. She skillfully leads a hula chant that is traditionally reserved for boys and gains the respect of those around her.

Within many books that center transgender characters, it is uncommon to have stories about trans characters doing things other than transitioning. In *Something Great* by Jeanette Bradley, a nonbinary child named Quinn builds an invention out of string and a milk carton that can do many things, including attract a friend with similar interests. Trans characters race to solve mysteries in *Zenobia July* by Lisa Bunker and *The Fabulous Zed Watson!* by

Basil Sylvester. In *Elle Campbell Wins Their Weekend* by Ben Kahn, a nonbinary tween protagonist schemes to get out of detention in order to meet their hero. Trans identity comes up often for these characters as they navigate the plot, but being trans is not the central focus.

With widely accessible LGBTQ+ young adult and children's books, young readers can now appreciate the roles of transgender people in history. Children's books portray the accomplishments of trans historical figures including computer scientist Lynn Conway, Civil War soldier Albert Cashier, and physician James Barry. These stories provide valuable access to role models for trans youth who are contemplating careers and wondering, "Can a trans person even do this?" But what's missing is representation of modern and living trans people in diverse careers. For example, the visibility campaign 500queerscientists.com profiles LGBTQ+ people working in STEM fields, and its messages of affirmation and community are just waiting to be adapted for a younger audience.

There is a vast array of children's books that provide very strong portrayals of what it means to be transgender and the multitude of ways that can look. This is valuable for youth who are trans, questioning, and have trans family members, but also for any reader learning about the diversity of the world that they live in. More complexity within trans stories, and a shift away from focusing on the transition process, will expand the impact of these books for future generations and give future readers a shelf full of ways to be.

Sam Long is a transgender high school science teacher in Denver, Colorado, the recipient of a 2021 NEA Human and Civil Rights Award and a 2020 Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching, and co-founder of Gender-Inclusive Biology.

Relevant Resources

Advocates for Trans Equality

Advocates for Trans Equality (A4TE) fights for the legal and political rights of transgender people in America. Leveraging decades of experience on the frontlines of power, we shift government and society towards a future where we are no less than equal. Our policy experts, litigators, and community organizers work at all levels of government to ensure trans voices are not only heard but embraced in rooms where they've long been ignored. As a trans-led nonprofit, we also help our community navigate the realities of law and policy through vital tools, knowledge, and services, touching on topics such as student rights in school, how to navigate government identification, and understanding rights at the polls. To learn more, join one of A4TE's upcoming events.

A4TE recommends The Advocate Educator's Handbook: Creating Schools where Transgender and Nonbinary Students Thrive and Free to Be: Understanding Kids and Gender Identity as resources for learning about supporting transgender students.

GLSEN

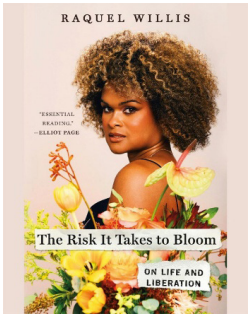
GLSEN is the leading national education organization focused on safe and inclusive schools for LGBTQ+ youth and educators. One GLSEN program, the Rainbow Library, sends free LGBTQ+ affirming K-12 books and resources to schools in 33 states. Over 60% of 2023-2024 Rainbow Library books were written by authors of color and 50% were written by trans or nonbinary authors.

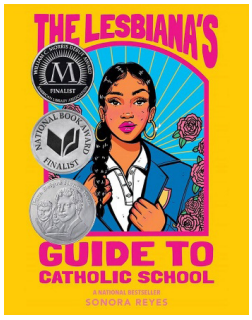
Request free books from GLSEN's Rainbow Library, including:

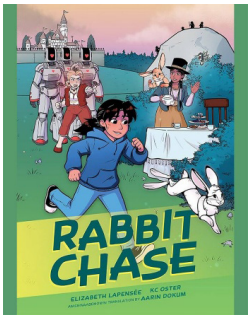
- Elementary titles: *My Rainbow* and *Rabbit Chase*
- Middle School titles: *In the Key of Us* and *Nikhil Out Loud*
- High School titles: *Lesbiana's Guide to Catholic School and Boys Run the Riot*

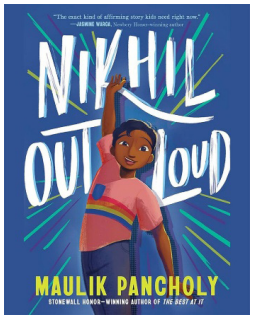
Use Rainbow Library elementary curriculum in your classroom. Get informed about students' freedom to read with the Rainbow Library Censorship Webpage.

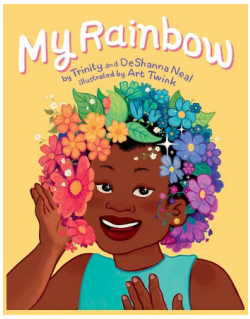
Book Recommendations

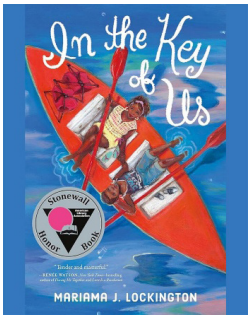


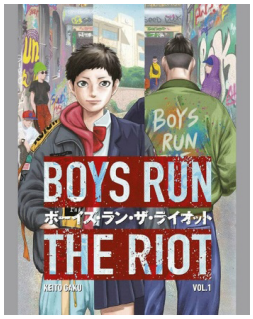












Better Disability Representation Means More Accessible Representation

Books with disabled, neurodivergent, or autistic characters are often stereotypes. Students need more accessible representation.

By AJ Link

Who is your favorite Power Ranger? Mine is the Black Power Ranger. Some of you might be thinking of the original Black Ranger Zack Taylor, played by Walter Jones, from the television show. I love that Ranger, and that probably would have been my answer until March 2017. That's when the Power Rangers movie reboot was released and Billy Cranston, the Blue Ranger portrayed by RJ Cyler, identified as Black and Autistic.

That 2017 Power Rangers movie is not very memorable and did not get the best reviews. But I love the movie simply because there's a Black, Autistic character (though the actor, RJ Cyler, is not openly Autistic). The first time I got called a racial slur for being Black, I was about 3 years old. I was so young at the time that I hadn't yet developed an actual understanding of what it meant to be a Black person in the United States. My racial identity was weaponized against me before I even had an opportunity to own it and embrace it. Conversely, I didn't know I was Autistic until I was diagnosed in my early twenties, and I didn't identify as Disabled until a few years after that. As an adult with a nonapparent disability, I was able to process my relationship to Disability in a way that I was never afforded as a Black person. I wonder how different my experiences with race and disability would have been if I grew up with access to Black, Disabled representation. Would my relationship to these identities be different, would they have been impacted by the representations I had access to?

I wasn't alive during the Blaxploitation era, but my childhood happened during the prime years of Black Entertainment Television (BET) and rise of Black culture beginning to dominate the mainstream. I had access to some Black representation media, even if there wasn't as much as there is today. But I don't remember any prominent and explicit Black and Disabled or Black and Neurodivergent or Black and Autistic characters. I'm not saying these characters never existed, just that I do not remember them. These types of characters felt exceedingly rare and never with prominent storylines or character arcs.

Today, there is more disabled storytelling of racialized characters that avoids reducing Disabled characters to just their disability or negative stereotypes about disability. But despite those improvements, there has been a shift toward other superficial representations, such as the inspiration exploitation of Disabled characters and also real life Disabled people. Inspiration exploitation, also referred to as inspiration porn, still dominates a lot of the stories about disability in mainstream media. These stories show a Disabled person "overcoming" their disability or disabilities in order to do everyday tasks. This paternalistic view of Disabled people and their lives is extremely harmful because it perpetuates the idea that Disabled folks are incapable of doing mundane things and should be celebrated for doing things that non-Disabled individuals do regularly. There are also several examples of non-Disabled actors portraying Disabled characters in categorically ableist ways that promote the competing stereotypes of Disabled people being either helpless or superhuman to the point of parity. Examples of this include the familiar trope of using disability as part of a character arc to show someone's humanity like in the 2018 film, "The Upside" and the super genius autistic without empathy represented in the show, "The Good Doctor." Children's books and media can help pushback against these harmful narratives and stereotypes. Including Disabled characters in stories that children consume can help normalize disability in a way that happens far too infrequently today, even in adult media.

I wish I could have been exposed to Black Disability long before I first read books like *Black Disability Politics* by Sami Schalk, *Autistic and Black* by Kala Allen Omeiza, and *Blackness and Disability* edited by Christopher M. Bell. Today, my work is influenced by Disability Justice, DisCrit, Disability Theory and Crip Legal Theory. Black and Disabled youth deserve to be exposed to these academic concepts and ideas, but they shouldn't have to be to access representations of their experiences. For example, a Black, Disabled kid does not need to know about or understand the concept of neuroexpansiveness and how it was developed by Kassiane Asasumasu specifically for Black people as a rejection of neurodivergence in order to enjoy stories about Black folks who do not have neurotypical experiences.

The relationship between Blackness and Disability is complex and the history of disability within the Black community is complicated. One of the books that does a great job illustrating this complicated history is *The Unteachables* by Keith A. Mayes. The book describes how special education for students with disabilities was used as way to segregate and harm Black children, regardless of whether or not they identified as disabled or had a disability. The stigma of disability has been used to harm Black people all along the dis/ability continuum, which makes it hard for many in the Black community to embrace Disability Pride. Instead, the Black community has found its own ways to shield and protect disabled people within the community from outside harm, including ignoring or denying or avoiding the label of disability.

There are several social and cultural dynamics that interact with one another to create ablenoir (ableism experienced by those racialized as Black) and disabiliphobia, both inside and outside the Black community. There is also racism within the Disabled community, not to mention Disability Hierarchies (the idea that some disabilities are "better" or "worse" than other disabilities or that some disabilities are "realer" and deserve more attention and support than others) and the insidious notion of being "disabled enough." All of this, and more, happens at the intersection of being Black and Disabled. Black, Disabled people can have many more identities that impact our lives as they move through the world – after all, we are multidimensional beings with multidimensional experiences – and we deserve to see and hear and read our stories. More than that, we deserve access to this representation.

Conversations about disability almost always include discussions about accommodations and accessibility. Accommodations are individualized, often legally required, adjustments or changes that a disabled person can request to make an environment more accessible for that individual. The concept of accessibility is different because it focuses on making an environment as accessible as possible for as many people as possible without putting the onus on an individual to request a specific accommodation. Generally accessible spaces allow all folks, not just Disabled folks, to self-accommodate if possible. Sometimes disabled people will still require formal accommodations even if a space applies the principles of universal design with general accessibility in mind.

This difference in approaches to disability inclusion is made stark in the realm of education. The contrast is most stark in primary education where laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) require IEPs and 504 Plans, respectively, for students with disabilities depending on the circumstances. These plans, and the accommodations they provide, have improved the educational experiences for millions of Disabled students, but often at the cost of segregating Disabled students out from mainline classes with nondisabled students. Parents, teachers, administrators, and school districts usually focus on legal compliance with laws to the detriment of expanding access for Disabled students in mainline classes. This lack of inclusion of Disabled students with their nondisabled peers hurts both groups — Disabled students are ostracized and treated differently, and nondisabled students are deprived from regular interactions with disabled people. This teaches stigma and othering while also depriving all students of the opportunity to practice inclusive accessibility.

The experience in higher education is slightly different where accommodations are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Disabled students in higher education, while not separated out from classes with their fellow students, still faces the stigma of being Disabled and/or receiving accommodations. They also still lack access to disabled representation in the classroom just like their disabled counterparts in primary and secondary education. There are few openly Disabled teachers and professors and Disabled representation in course material is not exactly ubiquitous outside of disability studies classes. Disabled histories and the stories of Disabled icons like Judy Heumann are not commonly known and the disabilities of more well-known historical figures like Harriet Tubman and Frida Kahlo are often erased from their stories. There has been some improvement over the last few years, but there is still a lack of access to Disabled representation — especially for multiply marginalized individuals. The struggle to make sure Disabled histories are told by Disabled professors in higher education shows why it is so important to fight to include these stories in primary education as well as children's books and other media. No one should have to wait until college to be exposed to these important stories.

Access is more than just physical access to a space. It is emotional access and relational access and financial access to space. This concept, which some people call radical accessibility, should include having access to representative stories in media and other mainstream places. For far too long, Black, Disabled folks have not had enough access to our stories. Now thanks to Vilissa Thompson, Imani Barbarin, Keith Jones, and so many others — Black, Disabled stories are finally getting platformed and elevated. We need more of this. Young Black, Disabled kids deserve to have access to representative stories that are as complicated as the lives they are living and not merely inspiration exploitation or negative stereotypes about being Disabled and Black.

AJ Link is a policy analyst with the Autistic Self Advocacy Network.

Relevant Resources

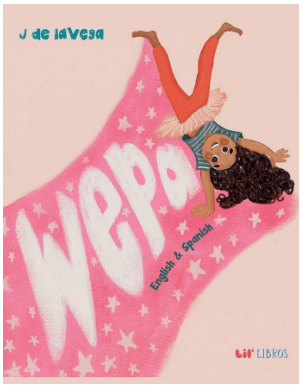
Alice Wong

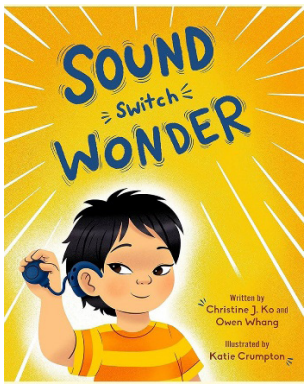
Alice Wong (she/her) is a disabled activist, writer, editor, and community organizer. She is the founder of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. Alice is the editor of *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, an anthology of essays by disabled people and *Disability Visibility: 17 First-Person Stories for Today*, an adapted version for young adults. Her debut memoir, *Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life* was published in 2022. Her latest anthology, *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire* is available now. Twitter: @SFdirewolf.

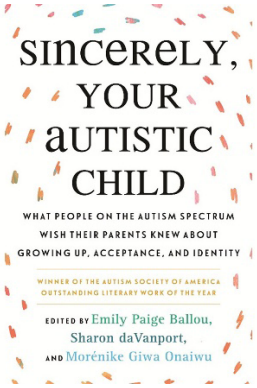
MaiStoryBook

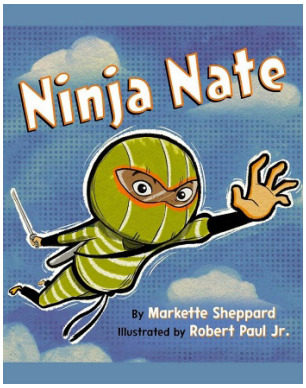
MaiStoryBook is where Maya Lê spotlights children's illustrated books and shares resources for parents, families, and teachers to inspire a love for books and a curiosity for the world of reading. She creates collections of inclusive Book Recommendations, spotlighting, for example, books that have been banned, and books featuring physical differences and physical disabilities, and neurodivergences and cognitive disabilities.

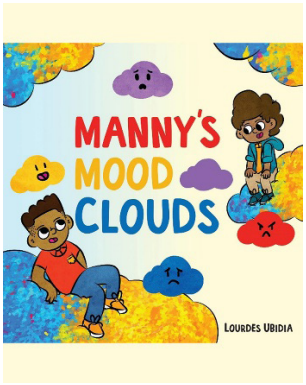
Book Recommendations

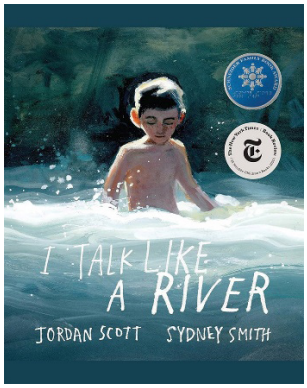


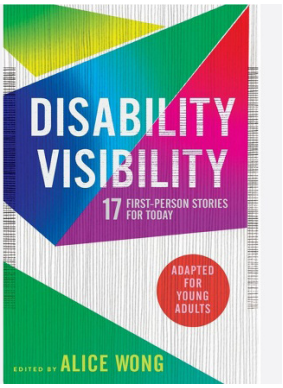


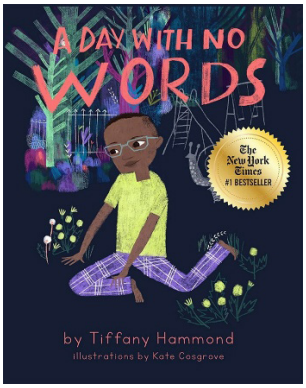












More Than Windows and Mirrors: Canvases for Education Equity

When teachers develop inclusive curriculum, the most powerful mirrors can magnify, helping students see and define themselves while gaining a sense of self.

By Sabrina Wesley-Nero, Ph.D.

Brought to You by the Letter "B"

When my son was turning 3, we had a small party in our basement. It was a themed playdate really with just his normal friend group who regularly met in local parks to play together plus the added fun of cake and ice cream in my basement. It was simple. The theme also was simple. Riffing off Sesame Street, the ultimate parenting bible, I chose the party theme "Brought to you by the letter "B" – books, blocks, balls, and bubbles" all items that took up residence in my basement. I invite you to a similar party, a party brought to you by the letter "B" where we critically clean Blurred mirrors and windows and actively Build a just and equitable future.

Mirrors and Windows

The focus on mirrors and windows, imagery advanced by Emily Style and Rudine Sims Bishop to articulate how students should see themselves and others in diverse materials, is often concentrated on how that diverse representation arises in the books and other materials teachers use. However, educators' practices are a critical element to the construction of windows and mirrors.

When curriculum and pedagogy are carefully constructed, the most powerful mirrors can magnify, helping students see and define themselves and their communities while gaining a sense of self that transcends time. They can allow educators to look closely at complexity and nuance. They surface previously ignored details. Magnifying mirrors can disrupt "single stories."

Clear windows are those that make it easy enough to see contextually bounded lived experiences. Well-constructed curriculum and pedagogy help students see through clear windows, challenging stereotypes, exposing assumptions, and developing comfort with difference and discomfort. Through clear windows, students begin to recognize sameness among differences and resituate the sameness in ways that don't essentialize and the differences in ways that do not denigrate. Good practice uses these windows to build students' cultural dexterity and expands their repertoires.

Clear windows also allow educators to see what is in front of them, so they can look for who is missing. Who is missing in seats of power, voice, and access – in classrooms, schools, and communities? Who is missing in the voices of those who author the texts teachers use? When educators engage students in problem-solving and sense-making in math and science classes, whose problems are centered? Whose knowledge is foregrounded? Whose ways of problem-solving are honored? Windows allow teachers to foster empathy and help identify inequity as well as possibility.

Blurred Mirrors and Dirty Windows

Blurred mirrors reflect poorly, distorting our senses of self. Think, for example, what "single story" narratives mean for those students whose social identities are portrayed. Flat narratives that paint you and your ancestors as perpetual heroes or perpetual victims. Or narratives that portray only one way of being and belonging to your regional, cultural, racial, ethnic, or linguistic group. Blurred mirrors in a classroom label your language as valued but denigrate the variety of the language you use to express your values, interests, and passions.

Dirty windows are difficult to see through, providing only flat, one-sided, distorted and often deficit-based views of those who are different from you. This can take the form of idolizing another person's language, culture, and identity or internalizing a deficit-view of your own while wrestling with imposter syndrome. This also can take the form of pathologizing or demonizing others based on the limited view a dirty window makes available.

By contrast, equity and justice-oriented education can be revolutionary. It can be liberatory.

I invite us to go a step further still, beyond "books" and beyond a focus on magnifying mirrors and clean windows so that we, as educators, ignite our students' justice imagination. What kind of future do we hope our students will build? How could we equip our students with the fundamental skills and dispositions to create building blocks that span the deep divides evident in our country? How could igniting our students' justice imagination provide oxygen to sparks where they envision a more equitable future?

Canvases

Igniting students' justice imagination involves at least two components: courage and critical hope. Educators are to develop students' understanding of systemic and institutional injustice. A nuanced understanding of injustice is facilitated by engaging with mirrors with high degrees of amplification and windows cleared from smudges that seek to mar, blur, and erase. Mirrors and windows humanize. They set the foundation for imagining equity. A justice imagination enables students to paint a vision of an equitable world. Without a vision the people perish. Equipped with critical insight into themselves and others, students are positioned to create a new future and paint a new world onto canvases. Courage and critical hope are the brushes and paints that students use on their canvases. As Duncan-Andrade explains, critical hope is animated when we skillfully and bravely apply a critical lens to our history and contemporary contexts, manage the pain that occurs when we develop a nuanced understanding of oppression and inequity, and boldly imagine a more equitable future.

Building a Just and Equitable Future

To advance this nation toward educational justice, we must ensure our schools are mirrors and windows; provide students with canvases and ignite their justice imagination built upon the hope of a better future. Inclusive and representative curriculum and classroom celebrations become the norm, necessary and insufficient. Through equity-oriented education that also provides windows, students can see beyond their lived experiences. Education should equip students with the skills, knowledge, and critical understanding of the world, the peoples of the world, and the histories of the world. For some students, this may mean developing a nuanced understanding of those who traditionally have been "othered," shining light on those who previously were rendered invisible. For some students, this may mean developing the skills and knowledge to clearly see the power dynamics that operate outside of, but often constrain, their communities.

Students take this knowledge into their lives, where they are neither expected to abandon their home communities or colonize the communities of others. Instead, learners gain the ability to facilitate and to live in a heterogenous, multilingual world. Learners then imagine and co-create a future where plurality is celebrated and equity is the norm.

I collaborate with educators, families, and community supporters to inspire students' social justice imagination and envision a just future at the 1619 Freedom School. This community-based after-school program enhances students' literacy, knowledge of Black history, and academic self-efficacy. The historically responsive curriculum explores rich, often-untaught narratives of Black American history, emphasizing resistance, excellence, and bravery. Students learn local history, encountering the actions and actors that propelled their communities toward liberation through place-based units. In addition to developing critical reading skills, the students create projects and texts that reject deficit perspectives and envision freedom for themselves and their communities. The school's ethos and pedagogical strategies affirm students' identities and power as literate, agentic changemakers.

Join me. Let's grab our tools that include but also reach beyond the literature we offer in our classrooms. With courage and humility, let's embrace the messy process of becoming better humans together and supporting our students as they do the same. And, let's move forward with intention and purpose.

We can position justice and an equitable education as our north star. We can refashion tools that shine light, embrace the iterative experiences of a process that is messy and worthwhile. We can form teams and communities of future-forward designers with strategic and intentional plans. We can envision with students and families the world we want and the world they deserve.

Sabrina Wesley-Nero, Ph.D., is a teaching professor at Georgetown University and a curriculum lead for the 1619 Freedom School.

Relevant Resources

Teaching for Change

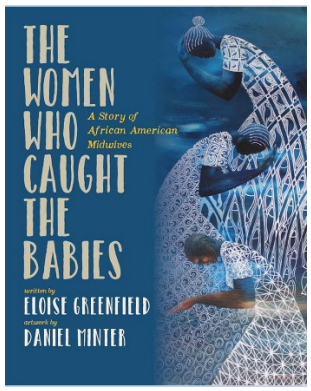
Teaching for Change is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide teachers and parents with the tools to create schools where students learn to read, write and change the world. Join our mailing list for updates about new resources and events.

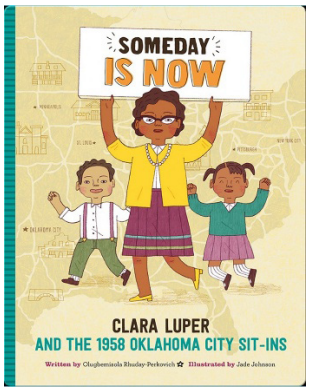
Since its founding in 1989, Teaching for Change has vetted and promoted social justice books for children and adults. This is in response to the wide diversity gap in children's books and the publishing industry. More than half of the children enrolled in U.S. public schools are people of color or Native American, but only 34% of children's books published in 2022 were about people of color.

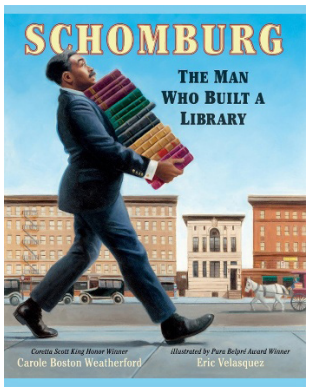
Teaching for Change developed SocialJusticeBooks.org to critically review and promote multicultural and social justice children's books. It builds on the tradition of the Council on Interracial Books for Children which provided a social justice lens to reviews of children's literature. We aim to provide visibility to books that address the goals outlined in Professor Wesley-Nero's article and encourage publishers to produce more titles with the windows, mirrors, and canvases she describes.

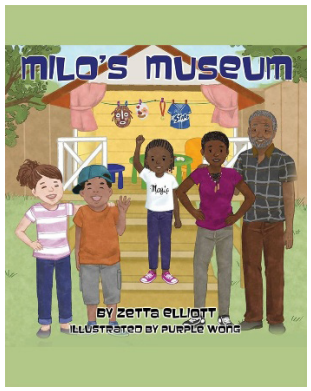
Here are just a few examples of books we recommend. They are currently threatened by book bans and the chilling effect of anti-history education laws.

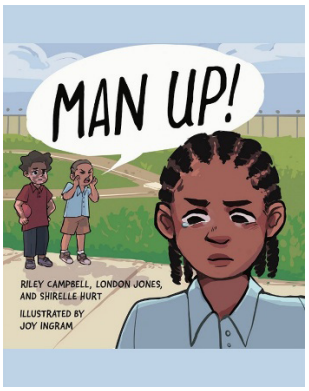
Book Recommendations











Native Students—and Non-Native Students—Deserve to Learn About the True Experiences of Indigenous People

The lack of Indigenous representation and humanity, the whitewashing of history, can deter Native students from learning.

By Terese Mailhot

One of my most formative childhood memories was on my first day of first grade. During free time, I made a book and bound it together with yarn or tape. I wrote and drew a tale about a unicorn with rainbow hair. My teacher was impressed and when he told my mom how smart I was, she said something like, "I know." She seemed icy, and almost angry at the compliment. Mom knew I was literate and artistic. Her work with me began at four. I had my own library of diverse books, and she enjoyed decorating my bedroom with educational posters she made herself. I expected her to be proud when my teacher praised me, but instead she was weary. She told me that school was, "a choice," and I didn't understand her then, but I grew to see what she meant.

For Indigenous people of her generation, kids were often put into government funded schools after being apprehended from their families and taken from the only communities they knew. Children were treated like soldiers, called by number, and rarely admired or held. It was an assimilation effort that harmed many — and she ran away from it. Mom rarely talked about her experience, and although she returned to an academic life in her later years, she was always suspicious of what my teachers were teaching. She feared the academic space for kids prioritized whiteness in their pedagogy and content — and they did, unfortunately.

Mom was attending college to become a teacher while I was in grade school. She even did a practicum at my elementary. She kept her eyes on my curriculum and tried to make a difference. In the third grade, she analyzed my reading list and asked my teacher to substitute *Huck Finn* for something more contemporary with fewer slurs. "Your teacher is not teaching one book by a Black man or woman," Mom said.

It hurt to have the book switched out. The rest of the class read and discussed Mark Twain while I was left alone to read *The Cay,* by Theodore Taylor, a book arguably just as problematic. Mom's good work allowed me to see the racism and lack of diversity in the classroom, but it felt isolating to be the only student with a mother fighting to improve the system. Those who speak out against the biased status quo are often treated like the problem. I felt like the problem child, so when I got to high school, I asked her to let me fight for myself in my own way. She acquiesced and understood I was growing and becoming a woman. "The fight is yours now," she said.

We had our deepest conversations by the river, right before we prayed. Before I started my junior year, Mom took me to the water, and I prayed for school to be better and more fruitful. A prayer to the river is like a hope placed in the current. Not every prayer gets answered, but it's nice to put a little tobacco in water and imagine better.

In seventh grade, my social studies teacher gave a long-winded lecture about diversity. It was an embarrassing effort on his part. He talked to students about "tolerating" difference, as if Native people were something to be tolerated. It offended me, and instead of speaking up I checked out. I stopped doing assignments, and started skipping school, which led to administrative intervention. I showed passive resistance to a system I could not change.

They eventually placed me in an alternative school where I could advance toward graduation, completing workbooks at my own pace. The work felt stale. My peers and I were often treated like "bad" or "lost" kids, when we were just young adults struggling with authority or homelife. I eventually dropped out and it took about a decade to return and earn my GED. By the time I graduated, I was very grown, very autonomous, and strong enough to survive in the academic realm and advocate for equal treatment, diversity, and equity.

I love books and writing more than almost anything. My career required an advanced degree and study. The lack of representation, the lack of humanity during my studies, deterred me from a life of learning for a long time.

I'm a best-selling author now, and sometimes I mourn time lost hiding from academia. I am a courageous woman like my mother, who couldn't be deterred long from learning spaces, but I know a lot of people who dropped out and never returned. I know a lot of people who found educational spaces too violent and ignorant to learn in.

I still take tobacco to the river and carry hope for better. I've become a mother, and my sons are at college and elementary ages. Sometimes I check out their reading lists, or hear how history is being taught, and it gives me worry. While things are moderately better for young people learning, there is still so much left to do.

The world opens wide with difference when you let it exist in the classroom without burden, shame, or biases. School should be a space of inspiration. All my children are artists and deep thinkers at heart. I think of my mother when they tell me about the ignorance they face as Indigenous learners — I think of myself when I see them uninspired with the content they're being taught.

My second youngest recently had a week learning about the presidents. They had a mini focus on Lincoln, and my child talked about Lincoln's transgressions against Indigenous people. He mentioned the mass hanging of 38 Dakota men. The teacher was impressed, and encouraging, but the classroom wasn't prepared to have that conversation yet. They moved onto other presidents, and my son, the avid reader, brought up the transgressions of those other men. I was proud to hear about it.

My hope is that learning spaces can become more ready for stories, for difference, for growth and the truth we Indigenous people live with each day. I want all students to feel seen, and for all marginalized stories and experiences to be just as valid as the centered work we've been taught for so long.

Terese Mailhot is the New York Times bestselling author of Heart Berries: A Memoir.

Relevant Resources

American Indians in Children's Literature

Established in 2006 by Dr. Debbie Reese of Nambé Pueblo, American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL) provides critical analysis of Indigenous peoples in children's and young adult books. Dr. Jean Mendoza joined AICL as a co-editor in 2016. A primary purpose of AICL is to help everyone know who Native people are. That knowledge can help readers understand why Native people object to being misrepresented. Though authors do not set out to deliberately misrepresent Native people, it happens over and over again. Information is the only way to counter those misrepresentations. AICL contributes this information through analyses of children's books, lesson plans, films, and other items related to the topic of American Indians and how this topic is taught in school. AICL also provides an annual essay that highlights the year's events, and a list of the year's best books.

American Indian Library Association

The American Indian Library Association (AILA), affiliate of the American Library Association (ALA), is a membership action group that addresses the library-related needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Members are individuals and institutions interested in the development of programs to improve Indian library, cultural, and informational services in school, public, and research libraries on reservations. AILA is also committed to disseminating information about Indian cultures, languages, values, and information needs to the library community. AILA cosponsors an annual conference and holds a yearly business meeting in conjunction with the American Library Association annual meeting. It publishes the American Indian Libraries Newsletter twice a year. Awarded biennially, the American Indian Youth Literature Award (AIYLA) identifies and honors the very best writing and illustrations by Native Americans and Indigenous peoples of North America. The recommendations below are each winner or honor book recipients of the 2024 American Indian Youth Literature Awards.

Book Recommendations

More Asian American Representation: Because Children Are Naturally Inquisitive

Politically repressive campaigns such as anti-CRT are harmful to children's cognitive and civic development.

By OiYan Poon

In 2018, my then three-year-old daughter Té Té asked me, "Mama, are we Black?"

"No, we're not Black," I answered.

"Are we white?" she asked.

"No, we're not white," I said, suspecting what she would ask next.

"Then what are we?" she wondered out loud.

"We're Asian American," I responded. "Can you say, 'Asian American'?"

"Asian kAH-merican," she slowly pronounced in her sweet toddler voice. She precociously pushed back, "But Asian kAH-merican isn't a color!"

Té Té wasn't wrong. Asian Americans are all different colors. Asian American is a racial category and wide umbrella term that includes South Asian Americans (e.g., Bengali, Indian, Pakistani), Southeast Asian Americans (e.g., Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese), and East Asian Americans (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese). As I explain to my daughter in my new book, *Asian American is Not a Color: Conversations on Race, Affirmative Action, and Family* (Beacon Press, 2024), Asian American is a political identity rooted in a solidarity ethic that young people created during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s for collective cross-ethnic community-care and power building.

My daughter's observation stunned me — a race scholar and education policy researcher. When I became a mother, I expected there would be mother-daughter conversations like this, but I had not anticipated them to come so early in her life. I remember fumbling through some sociological explanation about how race is a social construction. I was out of my depth when it came to supporting her curiosities about the world.

Thankfully, Té Té's teachers have been generous partners in supporting her inquisitiveness and learning. I may be a professional race scholar, but they are the experts when it comes to early childhood and elementary education. We do not live in a state that has vilified, or even banned, teaching about race, gender, and sexuality.

Then, when Té Té was in the second grade, she came home and asked me, "Are we colonizers?" When I asked her why she was asking, she said, "We're learning about the colonization of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution at school. America colonized Haiti a hundred years ago. You say we're American, so doesn't that make us colonizers?" I confess these questions made me uncomfortable.

As I explain in my book, this conversation made me wonder if fellow parents who want to stop teachers from teaching about race, gender, and sexuality had similarly uncomfortable conversations. But instead of seeing their children's questions as emblematic of good teaching that encourages inquisitiveness, they have invested in a political project to shut down discussion, learning, and education.

These politically repressive campaigns are harmful to children's cognitive and civic development. They also stoke divisions in our communities, allowing the powerful political elite to harm communities of color for economic profit.

When Té Té asked if we were colonizers, it led to a rich mother-daughter conversation. We talked about our family's history. My parents grew up in Hong Kong, which was a British colony until 1997. They immigrated to the U.S., holding British Dependent Territories Citizen passports. They were colonial subjects under Queen Elizabeth II and immigrant settlers on Native American lands–namely, the homelands of the Massachusett and Pawtucket peoples–where I was born and raised.

A culturally affirming education for the 21st century does not flinch from difficult conversations about complex issues.

Unfortunately, some political actors want to repress children's natural desires and rights to learn and understand their relationships to the complex world around them. Some seek to erase our histories through book bans and censorship of curriculum. As of May 2024, twenty states have laws restricting how teachers can discuss race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The Legal Defense Fund (LDF) states, "These attacks are part of a larger effort to suppress the voice, history, and political participation of Black Americans," and other people of color.

Most people (more than 75%) want schools to teach about our complex historical truths. This includes 7 in 10 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who support "teaching historical topics such as slavery, racism, and segregation" and the history of AAPI communities. The majority of Americans understand that learning our histories is essential for our diverse democracy to grow.

Starting in 2020, as public attention turned toward a documented rise of anti-Asian racism, a policy window opened to advance Asian American Studies in public schools. Starting with Illinois, several states began requiring the inclusion of Asian American history in public K-12 classrooms.

This is progress. The first time I had a chance to learn about Asian American histories — how people from Asian diasporas confront racism, strategize to overcome discrimination, and contribute toward U.S. society — was in college. The Asian American Studies class I took gave me a language to understand painful experiences with intersectional racism in my life. I learned how such a vastly diverse population made up of dozens of ethnic groups of people who speak dozens of distinct languages, that practice an array of religious and spiritual traditions, and arrived in the U.S. under disparate conditions and histories of global empire, labor exploitation, and war, came to be identified as Asian American. I learned how Asian Americans experienced the widest income disparities, with Asian Americans at both the highest and lowest economic strata.

Asian American studies and ethnic studies classes and learning communities developed my critical thinking and problem-solving skills in a way that improved my overall academic performance and college experience. They improved my understanding of my family's history and opened possibilities for intergenerational healing. I also learned how Asian American experiences were connected to other communities of color and how Asian Americans have been part of movements for social justice. I was inspired to be part of efforts to make the world more humanizing and just.

I am not alone in these experiences. Researchers have found that Ethnic Studies curriculum improves academic outcomes for students of color, self-perceptions, and cross-cultural appreciation and interactions necessary for a diverse democracy. So,it is an exciting time to witness the growth of Asian American studies in public schools. But it is also disheartening to witness attacks on African American history in schools. As the Association for Asian American Studies explained, "There can be no truly representative or accurate teaching of Asian American and Pacific Islander history without African American history. Doing so would only offer a diluted picture of historical reality."

To be sure, it can be uncomfortable and unsettling to learn about and reflect on U.S. history and its contemporary implications through multiple perspectives that do not provide a singular righteous (white) American story of triumph.

Our histories are not simple. Our future as a democratic society depends on our capacity to teach and learn with honesty about our historical conflicts, political struggles, and accomplishments. As LDF explains, "We cannot progress further and build a better society for our children if we can't talk about where we are coming from. Defending education that is historically accurate and inclusive of the experiences of Black Americans, Native Americans, Latinx Americans, Asian Americans, women, and other marginalized groups is the work we must all now do in the face of this coordinated backlash against an inclusive America."

OiYan Poon is co-director of the College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative, the NAACP LDF Thurgood Marshall Institute senior research fellow for education equity, and author of Asian American is Not a Color.

Relevant Resources

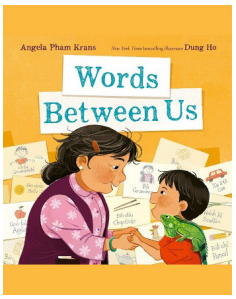
OiYan Poon recommends

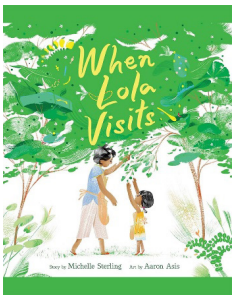
Teaching Asian America in Elementary Classrooms, Asian American Racialization and the Politics of U.S. Education, The Racialized Experiences of Asian American Teachers in the US, and the Asian American and Pacific Islander Multimedia Textbook as resources for learning about Asian American representation in U.S. education.

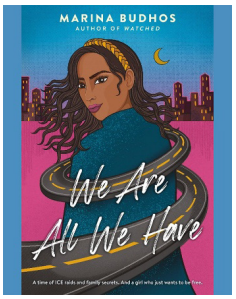
Asian Americans Advancing Justice

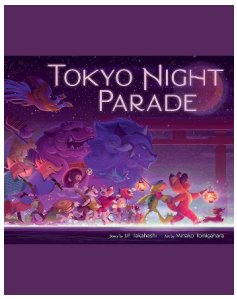
The Education Advocacy team at Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC offers capacity building resources for local and state-level organizations to advocate for inclusive K-12 curricula (including Asian American Studies) and equitable access to educational opportunities. Together with our education advocacy community partners AAVEd and AAPI New Jersey, we recommend the following titles for K-8 readers.

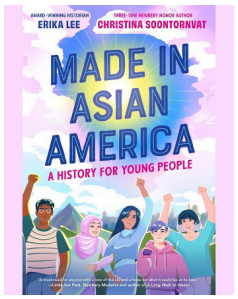
Book Recommendations

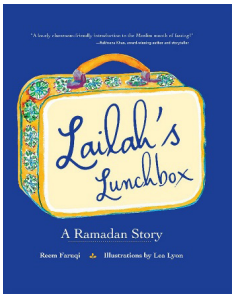


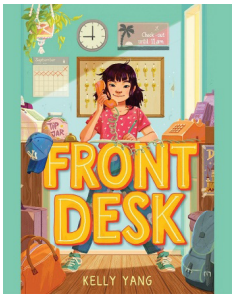


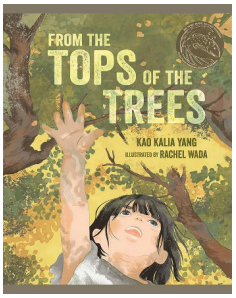












Why Children's Books Need to Discuss the Prison Industrial Complex

One example of book bans is the deliberate exclusion of any discussion of the history of the prison industrial complex from school curricula.

By William Freeman III and Alexa Garza

Children's literature has long served as a gateway for young minds to explore and understand the world around them. However, in many Black and Latino communities there is a glaring absence — a lack of representation of the hyper-militarized police surveillance and political targeting of juveniles. This deliberate omission is indicative of a larger issue of censorship and avoidance in education.

The targeting of juveniles by political entities through the censorship of books is a troubling trend that has serious implications for the education and development of young minds. One particularly egregious example of this censorship is the deliberate exclusion of any discussion of the history of the prison industrial complex from school curricula and reading lists.

No doubt, the prison industrial complex is an uncomfortable conversation for most people — but it impacts so many people's lives. Whether you acknowledge it or not, there exists an interdependent network of public and private institutions that profit from the incarceration of individuals, particularly people of color and those from underserved communities. This system has deep roots in the history of the United States, dating back to slavery and the convict leasing system.

So why should the prison industrial complex be represented in children's literature and integrated into education? The carceral state has a tangible presence in the lives of millions of children, with nearly 3 million having a parent behind bars. When considering formerly incarcerated parents, this number rises to 5 million children who are affected by parental incarceration. These children deserve to see their experiences reflected in the literature they consume.

By limiting these experiences in books and instructional materials, publishers are effectively whitewashing history and preventing young people from understanding the complexities of the criminal justice system and the role it plays in perpetuating social inequality.

Additionally, the school-to-prison pipeline begins with policies and practices that under-resource and hyper-surveil youth both in and out of schools. Children are exposed to the carceral system through their schooling experiences, with some educational institutions resembling fortresses more than places of learning.

Both of us have similar stories of the school-to-prison pipeline that have shaped our past and future.

Alexa's Story

Growing up in Texas, my brother and I experienced vastly different childhoods due to the environments of the schools we attended. I attended an inner-city public school with metal detectors and gang violence, while my brother went to a suburban school with a safer environment.

My brother managed to attend Mesquite High School, which was outside of the district we lived, by using a friend's address. However, two years later when it was my turn to start high school, that option was no longer available, and I ended up attending Dallas ISD.

I've noticed how educational access can vary significantly, even within the same region. The early school choices we made greatly influenced our paths in terms of resources, social networks, and overall experiences.

My brother's school was in a quiet suburb where the biggest issues were missed homework assignments and school dances. He had access to state-of-the-art facilities, caring teachers, and a supportive community. The most trouble he ever encountered was a disagreement with a classmate over the use of the school's photo lab.

I attended a school where it seemed like the teachers were primarily focused on maintaining control. I felt like I was lost in a sea of students who were louder and needed more attention. Despite earning straight A's, no one ever discussed a college pathway with me and I knew I wanted to attend college as my parents instilled in us both that college was the path to success.

My brother went on to earn a college degree, while I faced incarceration at the age of 19. Reflecting on our school experiences, I see how they shaped our lives in different ways. He seemed to have more support, while I often felt lost and overlooked. The choices I made ultimately led me to prison. I sometimes wonder if attending a different high school might have better prepared me for the future. It's a thought that lingers, but I understand that paths can take unexpected turns.

Conclusion

Understanding the carceral system is fundamental to the idea that our young people possess agency and will one day inherit the legacy of our democratic process. Every child is a future juror and voter who will make crucial decisions about policing policies that target their communities. By educating children about the carceral system, we empower them to make informed decisions and advocate for change.

It is imperative to push back against this form of censorship and demand that young people have access to a diverse range of perspectives and narratives, including those that discuss the history of the prison industrial complex.

In addressing censorship issues, it's crucial to advocate for all types of representation and education surrounding the reality of our young students. Only by equipping young people with a comprehensive understanding of the world around them can we hope to create a more just and equitable society.

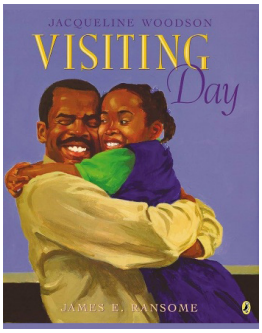
William Freeman is the higher education justice initiative manager at EdTrust and a Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg Fellow. Alexa Garza is a higher education justice initiative analyst at EdTrust and a policy analyst at EdTrust in Texas.

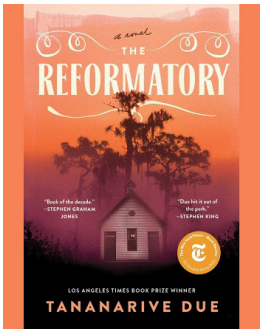
Relevant Resources

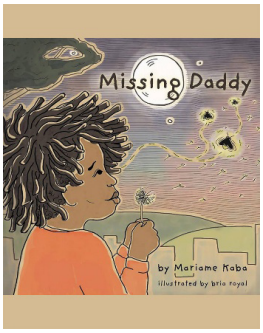
Mariame Kaba

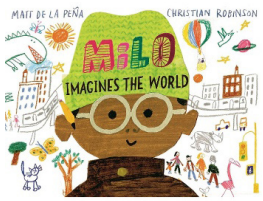
Mariame Kaba is an organizer, educator, librarian/archivist, and prison industrial complex (PIC) abolitionist who is active in movements for racial, gender, and transformative justice. Kaba co-leads Interrupting Criminalization, an abolition movement resource hub for organizers, practitioners, and advocates. Kaba has co-founded several organizations committed to community support, education, and advocacy, including Project NIA, which works to end the incarceration of children and young adults by promoting restorative and transformative justice practices, and the Chicago Freedom School, which provides education and leadership development for young people and adult allies to create a just world, and For the People, a political project aimed at building leftist power to protect, defend, and expand public libraries in communities across the county. Kaba is the author of the New York Times Bestseller *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* with Kelly Hayes, and *Missing Daddy*, a book written to help children with an incarcerated loved one to cope with loss, grief and trauma.

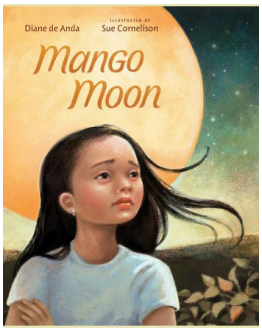
Book Recommendations

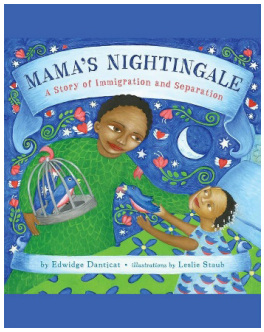


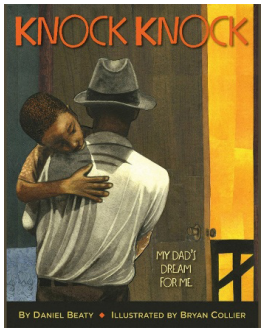


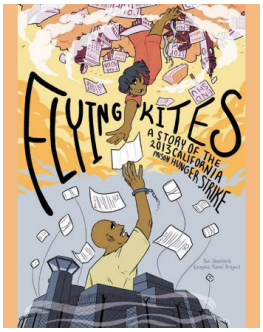












More Jewish Representation: When Your Intersectional Identity Becomes Living History

What does it mean to have true intersectional representation?

By Jordan Daniels

I remember feeling confused when the swastika took up an entire page in my eighth-grade yearbook. I wasn't particularly scared by what I saw but was more concerned with what it meant to the person who wrote it. Did they hate me? Was it a joke? And who did it? The only scary thought was realizing that it could have been from any one of my friends.

As the grandchild of Holocaust survivors, I take images like these seriously. My Jewishness wasn't something I discussed so much growing up, it was rather a secret hidden in plain sight — something my mom's side of the family was accustomed to since changing their names upon entry into America. I actually experienced more representation as a mixed-Black kid growing up in the Bay Area: in friend and family groups; in educational models; in theatre, TV, and film; in music; in books; and in activism. However, as a queer Black Jewish kid, there wasn't yet a curriculum developed that would allow me to see myself fully.

I didn't know much about being Jewish besides our family story of survival, and the only education I'd receive through my public school system was simply the story of the Holocaust. What stories could be told in school and media that demonstrated the joys and complexities of being Jewish, especially for this second-generation American Jew? What about the intersectionality of being Black, Jewish, and queer? Where is my representation in the media and in books?

These were questions left unanswered for most of my education, until I was in my college Hillels, which strived to share the joys and realities of being Jewish on campus. In connection with other Jewish students, I would learn about the radical fights of Emma Goldman, the powerful Civil Rights solidarity of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, Larry Kramer's telling of the 1980s AIDS Crisis, and of course, some of the most righteous dissents of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Throughout my time in higher education, I learned about inspiring Jewish changemakers, some of whom were also queer, which represented me further. I also learned about how vibrant Jewish communities can be through their existence and celebration of everyday Jewish culture. The weekly Shabbats with my Hillel at CSU Long Beach taught me how to express my Jewishness more openly, not for the sake of inspiring others, but to just exist proudly.

Finally, I got to fill in the puzzle of my identity a bit more. However, the puzzle took a different shape when I had to consider how my Jewishness fit with my other identities. I would be 23 by the time I got to meet another Jew of Color and more queer Jews. I remember meeting Ilana Kaufman, who was leading the Jews of Color Field Building Fund, for the first time at work. I was excited to hug someone who looked more like me than I'd ever seen before, albeit she looked cooler with her crisp fit, tatted sleeves, and collected energy. I got to be affirmed in the presence of someone who understood what it meant to not have a context for their history and was actively building that context themselves.

"Progress doesn't begin until intersectionality shows up," writes Jasmine Baten, in The Center for Scholars and Storytellers @ UCLA. "Intersectionality isn't an invisible or elusive concept: there are people with intersectional identities everywhere who live rich and deeply complex lives."

The article provides recommendations for centering intersectionality through notions like telling stories outside of the struggles of one's identities; building a team of intersectional backgrounds to better tell stories; and prioritizing underrepresented stories. Intersectionality, additionally, needs to go beyond race, gender identity, and sexuality, and also be inclusive of gender expression, body diversity, and ability.

What Does It Mean To Have True Intersectional Representation?

This is the question I'm working to answer every day now, and a question with answers unfolding by the day. In a full circle moment, I now work with Ilana and serve Jews of Color around the U.S through philanthropy. We fund the programs, leaders, and research helping write the histories that will hopefully fill my future children's textbooks. We're co-building the worlds for people like us to experience a reality where our stories are told from our families, institutions and our school systems, whether they're about thriving or struggling. It's a privilege to be able to hold both.

Outside of the workplace, I continue advocating for the liberation of Jews of Color and the many additional intersections we hold. I cohost an award-winning podcast, BFF: Black Fat Femme, that focuses on being unapologetic about who we are as Black LGBTQ+ people, and it's a space where I get to often bring in my Jewishness to the conversation. I get to use Jewish culture and knowledge to explore how we work to change the world around us.

I understand the importance of needing quality education about my identities because I know what life was like without it. It was challenging to miss a context to yourself, and even more challenging to be bullied for it. Thankfully, I thrived with the education I received as an adult, and the education I still receive today working in communities that reflect. I can't help but be continuously curious about what life would have been like if I was educated as a kid.

With gratitude and excitement, I know there's so much opportunity for that to happen to youth today. May they get toexperience a life of diverse and inspiring histories that make them feel seen and powerful.

Jordan Daniels is a program officer for the Jews of Color Initiative and co-host of the award-winning BFF: Black, Fat, Femme podcast.

Related Resources

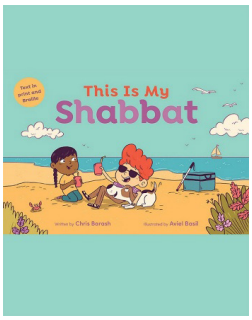
The Jews of Color Initiative

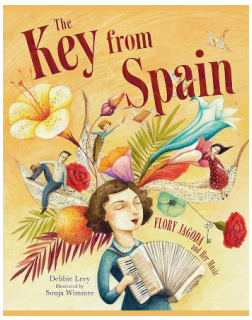
The Jews of Color Initiative advances racial equity in the U.S. Jewish community by centering the leadership of Jews of Color and ensuring that our communities and institutions reflect the multiracial reality of the Jewish people. We work to bring about these systemic changes through grantmaking, research, and educational programing, including racial justice learning materials and resources, and reports, like Beyond the Count, Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color.

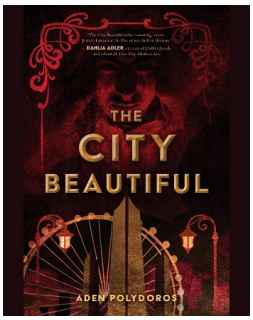
Sarah Aroeste

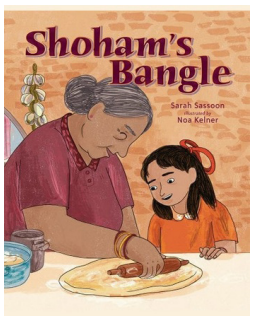
Inspired by her family's Jewish roots in N. Macedonia and Greece, where they settled after their expulsion from Spain in 1492, Sarah Aroeste has spent her career bringing Sephardic culture to new generations. Focusing on the Judeo-Spanish tradition of Ladino, the language that the exiled Jews developed in their new lands, Aroeste showcases the breadth of Jewish tradition by writing bilingual children's books that incorporate Ladino words and Sephardic themes. Her books include *Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom (Kar-Ben 2020), Mazal Bueno (Kar-Ben 2023) and the forthcoming books Uno, Dos, Tres (PJ Publishing 2025), Bavajadas! That's just silly! (PJ Library Publishing 2025), and Anyada Buena, Shanah Tovah (Kar-Ben 2025).*

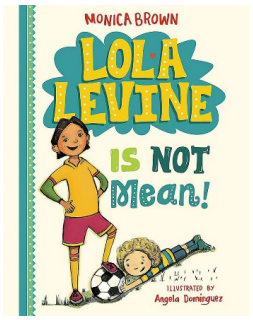
Book Recommendations

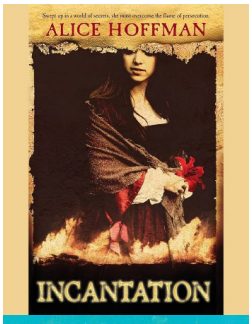


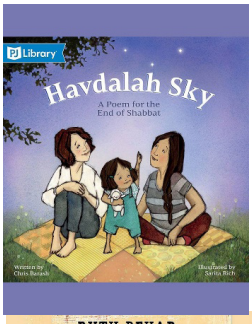


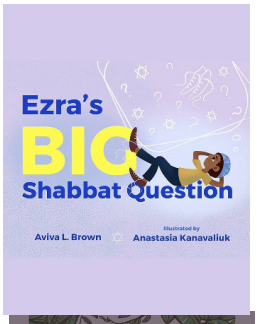


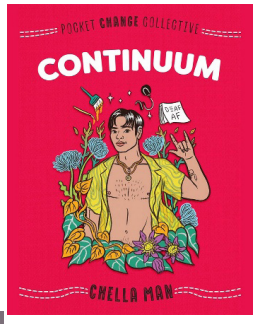


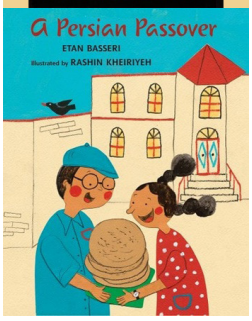


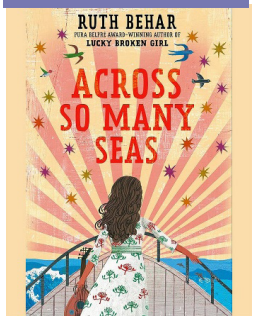


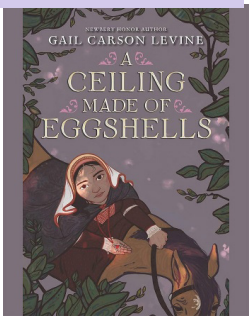












Book Recommendations by Age Group

EdTrust partnered with individuals and organizations who could provide recommendations for books that provide authentic and complex portrayals of their communities. We bring those recommendations together here.

Youngest Readers

Title	Author	Related Material
A Day With No Words	Tiffany Hammond	Black Disability Representation
A Letter for Bob	Kim Rogers	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
Abdul's Story	Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow	Muslim Representation
Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom	Sarah Aroeste	Jewish Representation
Ezra's Big Shabbat Question	Aviva L. Brown	Jewish Representation
Forever Cousins	Laurel Goodluck	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
From the Tops of the Trees	Kao Kalia Yang	Asian American Representation
Havdalah Sky	Chris Barash	Jewish Representation
Lailah's Lunchbox	Reem Faruqi	Asian American Representation
Lion on the Inside	Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir	Muslim Representation
Man Up!	Riley Campbell	African American Social Justice Representation
Mango Moon	Diane de Anda	Carceral System Representation
Manny's Mood Clouds	Lourdes Ubidia	Black Disability Representation
Missing Daddy	Mariame Kaba	Carceral System Representation
My Rainbow	Trinity and DeShanna Neal	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
See You Soon	Mariame Kaba	Carceral System Representation
Shoham's Bangle	Sarah Sassoon	Jewish Representation
Sound Wonder	Christine J. Ko	Black Disability Representation
The Masjid Kamal Loves	Ashley Franklin	Muslim Representation
This Is My Shabbat	Chris Barash	Jewish Representation
Tokyo Night Parade	J.P. Takashi	Asian American Representation
Un Aleteo de Esperanza	Cynthia Harmony	Afro-Latino Representation
Wepa	J. de laVega	Black Disability Representation
When Lola Visits	Michelle Sterling	Asian American Representation

Early Grades

Title	Author	Related Material
A Persian Passover	Etan Basseri	Jewish Representation
Celebration	Lily Hope	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
Eagle Drums	Nasuġraq Rainey Hopson	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
Grounded	Aisha Saeed	Muslim Representation
I Talk Like a River	Jordan Scott	Black Disability Representation
Jojo Makoons	Dawn Quigley	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
Knock Knock	Daniel Beaty	Carceral System Representation
Lola Levine is not Mean	Monica Brown	Jewish Representation
Mama's Nightingale	Edwidge Dantjcat	Carceral System Representation
Milo Imagines the World	Matt de la Peña	Carceral System Representation
Milo's Museum	Zetta Elliott	African American Social Justice Representation
Ninja Nate	Markette Sheppard	Black Disability Representation
Plátanos Van Con Todo	Alyssa-Reynoso Morris	Afro-Latino Representation
Someday Is Now	Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich	African American Social Justice Representation
That Flag	Tameka Fryer Brown	African American Social Justice Representation
The Gift Of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba	Rukayat Yakub	Muslim Representation
The Key From Spain	Debbie Levy	Jewish Representation
Visiting Day	James E. Ransome	Carceral System Representation
Words Between Us	Angela Pham Krans	Asian American Representation
Front Desk	Kelly Yang	Asian American Representation
Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library	Carole Boston Weatherford	African American Social Justice Representation
We Still Belong	Christine Day	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory

Middle Grades

Title	Author	Related Material
A Ceiling Made of Eggshells	Gail Carson Levine	Jewish Representation
Across So Many Seas	Ruth Behar	Jewish Representation
In the Key of Us	Mariama J. Lockington	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
Mani Semilla Finds Her Quetzal Voice	Anna Lapera	Afro-Latino Representation
Mascot	Charles Waters	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
Nikhil Out Loud	Maulik Pancholy	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
Planet Omar	Zanib Mian	Muslim Representation
Rabbit Chase	Elizabeth Lapensée	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
Salsa Magic	Letisha Marrero	Afro-Latino Representation
Sincerely Sicily	Tamika Burgess	Afro-Latino Representation
Something Like Home	Andrea Beatriz Arango	Afro-Latino Representation
The Next New Syrian Girl	Ream Shukairy	Muslim Representation

Young Adults

Title	Author	Related Material
Boys Run The Riot	Keito Gaku	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
Continuum	Chella Man	Jewish Representation
Disability Visibility	Alice Wong	Black Disability Representation
Funeral Songs for Dying Girls	Cherie Dimaline	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
Incantation	Alice Hoffman	Jewish Representation
Made in Asian America	Erika Lee	Asian American Representation
Rez Ball	Byron Graves	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
Sincerely, Your Autistic Child	Emily Paige Ballou	Black Disability Representation
The City Beautiful	Aden Polydoros	Jewish Representation
The Lesbiana's Guide to Catholic School	Sonora Reyes	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
The Reformatory	Tananarive Due	Carceral System Representation
The Risk it Takes to Bloom	Raquel Willis	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
The Women Who Caught the Babies	Eloise Greenfield	African American Social Justice Representation
All My Rage	Sabaa Tahir	Muslim Representation
Canto Contigo	Jonny-Garza Villa	Afro-Latino Representation
Flying Kites	The Stanford Graphic Novel Project	Carceral System Representation
Make it Count	Cecé Telfer	LGBTQ+ and Transgender Representation
Warrior Girl Unearthed	Angeline Boulley	Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Memory
We Are All We Have	Marina Budhos	Asian American Representation

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ABOUT EDTRUST

EdTrust is committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. Through our research and advocacy, EdTrust improves equity in education from preschool through college, engages diverse communities dedicated to education equity and justice and increases political and public will to build an education system where students will thrive.

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