



# NEPC Review: Representation of Social Groups in U.S. Educational Materials and Why It Matters (New America, December 2021)



Reviewed by:

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February 2022

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## Summary

Schools are currently the center of controversy over whose voices, knowledge, and perspectives should drive curriculum. In December 2021, New America released *Representation of Social Groups in U.S. Educational Materials and Why it Matters*, which argues that curriculum materials have the potential to engage minoritized students academically and teach everyone about America's diverse peoples. The report synthesizes research studies that analyze representation of diverse groups in curriculum materials, particularly children's literature. It finds an underrepresentation of minoritized racial/ethnic groups and females, very little attention to nonbinary and LGBTQ characters, and very little analysis of characters with multiple identities. The report concludes that many students consequently lose the opportunity to see themselves in curriculum and to learn about minoritized Americans who differ from themselves. The report provides helpful resources, although it has several limitations. First, it concentrates narrowly on character representation in literature; it gives little attention to questions pertinent to other subject areas, such as history. It is also limited by relying as much on non-peer-reviewed as on peer-reviewed studies. Finally, it misses opportunities to connect culturally relevant curriculum with student academic learning, connect gender with culturally relevant education, or reveal how cultures of power (white and male) are represented in curriculum. These limitations, however, do not detract from the overall validity of the report's conclusions. Taken as a whole, it draws needed attention to the importance of cultural relevance of curriculum materials.



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## I. Introduction

Schools are currently the center of controversy over whose voices, knowledge, and perspectives should drive curriculum. Students and communities of color in many parts of the U.S., such as California,<sup>1</sup> demand a curriculum that reflects their own realities and knowledge, which has spurred growth of K-12 ethnic studies. Concomitantly, politicians in several states are attempting to ban books and restrict how race and gender can be taught. This battle over curriculum matters because the population of the nation's classrooms is increasingly diverse, yet the nation struggles for consensus about how to address long-standing issues of racial and gender justice.

In December 2021, New America released *Representation of Social Groups in U.S. Educational Materials and Why it Matters: A Research Overview*, prepared by Amanda LaTasha Armstrong.<sup>2</sup> This timely report responds to recent policy initiatives designed to restrict teaching about race and/or gender diversity in the classroom. The report argues that curriculum materials, as part of a culturally responsive education, have potential to engage minoritized students in academic learning. However, materials still fall short in their representation of minoritized ethnic groups as well as gender diversity. As a result, the report concludes, many students lose the opportunity to see themselves in curriculum, and to learn about minoritized Americans who differ from themselves.

## II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

*Representation of Social Groups in U.S. Educational Materials and Why it Matters* is nest-

ed within two frameworks. One is New America’s 2020 guide to culturally responsive teaching, which delineates eight dimensions, including drawing on “students’ culture to shape curriculum and instruction.”<sup>3</sup> The other framework is the concept of curriculum as “windows and mirrors,”<sup>4</sup> which argues that curriculum materials can provide windows into the worlds of other people as well as enable students to see reflections of themselves.

Across the studies it reviews, the report finds an underrepresentation of minoritized racial/ethnic groups and females, very little attention to nonbinary gendered people and LGBTQ characters, and very little analysis of characters identified by both race/ethnicity and gender. It also finds ongoing stereotypes in children’s books and texts, but also some positive and authentic portrayals.

The report concludes that culturally responsive teaching done well fosters inclusion and engagement in learning, but that so far we have insufficient mirrors and windows for the diverse students in today’s classrooms. The concluding section offers three implications: 1) educational materials should create a sense of belonging by portraying a fuller story of the peoples of the United States, 2) characters in children’s books should represent culture authentically, and 3) characters should be drawn in enough detail that nuances in identity are visible.

### **III. The Report’s Rationale for its Findings and Conclusions**

This report attempts to counter current attacks against Critical Race Theory and attention to gender diversity in the classroom with evidence from its research review. It draws on research studies and other articles that use research to respond to three questions:

- What role do educational materials play in culturally responsive education, and specifically in supporting student academic learning as well as supporting students’ understanding of varied social identities?
- How often and in what ways do characters of underrepresented groups appear in educational media and materials?
- What is the nature of the portrayals of Native Peoples, Black and African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, Hispanic and Latinx Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, non-male genders, and intersectional groups?<sup>5</sup>

### **IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature**

The report states that it is based on over 160 research studies, which constitute the evidence for its conclusions. Oddly, however, it does not list the studies, making it difficult for readers to identify exactly which citations refer to research studies, and which refer to other types of articles (such as essays). While the report describes the research methodology used in some

studies, it does not do so for most; and it treats articles published in peer-reviewed journals, chapters in books, doctoral dissertations, reports on websites, and papers presented at professional conferences as if they were equally valid. Thus, it is difficult to evaluate the research basis for the report's conclusions without locating and reading the cited articles.

The report centers on analyses of children's literature, and this is where it is strongest. For example, in the section entitled Racial and Ethnic Groups Represented, six of the studies report analyses of children's literature, four of children's television, and one each of health textbooks, history textbooks, and posters. Because children's literature is so central to the review and selection of studies that are included, the report's driving questions center on character representation.

The problem with applying questions about character representation to subject areas other than literature is that questions more pertinent to those subject areas go unasked. For example, the report includes an analysis of elementary and middle school health textbooks, in which the authors examined images for their portrayal of race, ethnicity, and gender.<sup>6</sup> But an analysis of health texts might also ask whose culture defines health and wellness. Indigenous peoples, for example, tend to conceptualize health as an interconnection between earth, body, and spirit, and wellness as living a life in balance,<sup>7</sup> a conception that differs from that of Europeans and Euro-Americans.

Similarly, analyses of history texts generally ask whose narratives structure a text, and what concepts are highlighted, minimized, or omitted in any given narrative. For example, while the report accurately but briefly points out that history textbooks minimize attention to racialized systems in various periods in African American history, rather than delving into differences between dominant and African American narratives of history, it moves on to discuss how Black traditions, customs, and characters should be portrayed. Left unexamined is the powerful clash of narratives for youth who learn alternative narratives in their own communities, and subsequently often learn to distrust school knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

## V. Review of the Report's Methods

*Representation of Social Groups in U.S. Educational Materials and Why it Matters* showcases findings of studies, especially those investigating the presence and depiction of groups in curriculum materials. In the process, it does not distinguish between peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed studies, and in some cases underreports findings of peer-reviewed articles, or misses significant studies altogether. For example, the subsection on representation of Hispanic and Latinx Americans reduces Nilsson's<sup>9</sup> extensive study of Hispanic portrayal in children's literature over four decades to one sentence, while giving Gold's<sup>10</sup> dissertation study of history textbooks almost a paragraph.

The report cites Garth-McCullough's study<sup>11</sup> of the relationship between African American students' prior knowledge, their reading level, the cultural orientation of stories (i.e., African American, Chinese American, or European American), and students' comprehension of the stories; but only in a footnote with two other sources supporting the idea that culturally

responsive texts reduce cognitive load. While Garth-McCullough's study does support that idea, its data also substantiate the report's claim that texts that are culturally relevant to African American students support their academic learning. In other words, this well-designed peer-reviewed study should have been described in the report itself rather than being relegated to a footnote.

A section critiquing the portrayal of Native Peoples illustrates gaps in use of the research. Of the 12 works cited, two are not research studies of texts, and three are doctoral dissertations. The remaining seven are appropriate peer-reviewed research studies. The inclusion of additional recent studies of representation of Native people in history texts, published in peer-reviewed journals, would have strengthened the report's description and conclusions.<sup>12</sup>

Other missteps also weaken the report, such as using terms like "studies," "scholars," or "researchers" to refer to one study, one scholar, or one researcher; and its occasional stretching of what cited authors actually said.<sup>13</sup>

## **VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions**

The limitations in selection and use of some of the literature are unfortunate but do not detract from the overall validity of the report's conclusions. These conclusions are consistent with my own review of similar bodies of work across the subject areas<sup>14</sup> and with other reviews of single subject areas.<sup>15</sup>

The report draws needed attention to the importance of cultural relevance of curriculum materials for engaging minoritized students, and to ongoing problems of underrepresentation and stereotyping in materials. While its synthesis of underrepresentation and stereotypes is very helpful, the report misses several opportunities.

First, although its first section connects culturally relevant materials with student engagement, the report does not include research that connects culturally relevant curriculum with student academic learning.<sup>16</sup> This omission is important because evidence of improved student academic learning can serve as a powerful driver prompting educators, school boards, and policymakers to seek and adopt curriculum materials that are relevant to their own student bodies.

Second, the report misses the opportunity to connect gender with culturally relevant education. Although it links representation of gender in educational materials with career choice, evidence also indicates that seeing one's gendered self in curriculum helps students develop an academic identity<sup>17</sup> and sense of inclusion.<sup>18</sup> Discussing gender representation in the past, as the report does, is far less useful than reviewing research on the impact of gender representation on students today.

Third, by focusing on representation of minoritized racial, ethnic, and gender groups in curriculum materials, the report misses an opportunity to show how the culture of power is represented through white people and males. It also misses an opportunity to note the ex-

tent to which anti-racist white, and anti-sexist male allies and movements appear.

Finally, the report's implications would be clearer if the difference between windows and mirrors in curriculum was explained in more depth. Some teachers and policymakers may conclude simply that a more diverse curriculum offers both simultaneously, when in fact, minoritized students may still struggle to see representation of people like themselves.<sup>19</sup>

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

The limitations in selection and use of some of the literature are not significant enough to detract from the overall validity of the report's conclusions. Minoritized racial, ethnic, and gender groups are still underrepresented and stereotyped in curricula (although not as egregiously as in the past). This matters to student engagement and learning.



## Notes and References

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- 1 California is noteworthy for its state-wide ethnic studies requirements. AB 2016 established a model ethnic studies curriculum for K-12 schools; AB 101 requires that all high schools offer ethnic studies by school year 2025-26 and make ethnic studies a graduation requirement by school year 2029-30; and AB 1460 requires that all California State University campuses offer ethnic studies by fall, 2021.
- 2 Armstrong, A.L. (2021, December 1). *Representation of social groups in U.S. educational materials and why it matters*. New America. Retrieved December 10, 2021, from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/the-representation-of-social-groups-in-u-s-educational-materials-and-why-it-matter/>
- 3 Armstrong, A.L. (2021, December 1). *Representation of social groups in U.S. educational materials and why it matters* (p. 7). New America. Retrieved December 10, 2021, from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/the-representation-of-social-groups-in-u-s-educational-materials-and-why-it-matter/>
- 4 In her article “Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop elaborated on the importance of students seeing themselves reflected in curriculum as well as having windows into the worlds of people different from themselves. See Bishop, R.S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 1(3), ix-xi.
- 5 The report uses the term “intersectional groups” to refer to characters with intersectional identities. In other words, this refers to analyses of children’s books and textbooks that identified more than one identity group of characters (usually race/ethnicity and gender).
- 6 Deckman, S.L., Fulmer, E.F., Kirby, K., Hoover, K., & Mackall, A.B. (2018). Numbers are just not enough: A critical analysis of race, gender, and sexuality in elementary and middle school health textbooks. *Educational Studies*, 54(3), 285-302.
- 7 Indigenous peoples, for example, tend to conceptualize health as an interconnection between earth, body, and spirit, and wellness as living a life in balance, a conception that differs from that of Europeans and Euro-Americans.  
See:  
Manitowabi, B. & Shawande, M. (2011). The meaning of Anishinabe healing and wellbeing on Manitoulin Island. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 9 (2), 441-458. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1060.8282&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- 8 See, for example, Terrie Epstein’s discussion of how Black and White students interpret what they are taught about U.S. history in school, in relationship to what they have learned in their homes and communities, in her book *Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities* (2009, Routledge).
- 9 Nilsson, N.L. (2005, March). How does Hispanic portrayal in children’s books measure up after 40 years? *The Reading Teacher*, 58(6), 534-548.
- 10 Gold, E.S. (2004). *United States history textbooks in high schools: Research on racial bias 1950-2000*. PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.
- 11 Garth-McCullough, R. (2008, October/November). Untapped cultural support: The influence of culturally bound prior knowledge on comprehension performance. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 48(1), 1-30. Retrieved January 7, 2022, from [http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol49/iss1/3/](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol49/iss1/3/)
- 12 Padgett, G. (2015). A critical case study of selected U.S. history textbooks from a tribal critical race theory

perspective. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(3), 153-171.

Sanchez, T.R. (2007). The depiction of Native Americans in recent (1991-2004) secondary American history textbooks: How far have we come? *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40, 311-320.

Stanton, C.R. (2014). The curricular Indian agent: Discursive colonization and indigenous (dys)agency in U.S. history textbooks. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 44(5), 649-676.

- 13 For example, on pages 6-7, the report footnotes five sources supporting the claim that many “within multicultural education, like culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy, have documented the importance of integrating materials that reflect students’ lives as well as expose them to new environments and experiences to support student learning.” Two of these sources, [Paris, D. (2012) Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97; and Ladson-Billings, G. (2014, March). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A.K.A. The remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74-84], discuss culturally sustaining pedagogy but not classroom teaching materials.

- 14 I reached similar conclusions in a review that centered more on history texts than on children’s literature.

See:

Sleeter, C. & Zavala, M. (2020). *Transformative ethnic studies in schools* (Chapter 2). New York: Teachers College Press.

- 15 Bush, P. & Mattox, S. (2020). Decadal review: How gender and race of geoscientists are portrayed in physical geology textbooks. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 68(1), 2-7

Lawler, T. & Niiler, T. (2020). Physics textbooks from 1960-2016: A history of gender and racial bias. *The Physics Teacher*, 58(5), 320-323.

- 16 Baker, T J. (2019). *The effects of an Afrocentric curriculum on reading scores of African American third, fourth, and fifth graders*. Self-published.

Cabrera, N.L., Milam, J.F., Jaquette, O., & Marx, R.W. (2014). Missing the (student achievement) forest for all the (political) trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American student controversy in Tucson. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(6), 1084-1118.

Duncan, W. (2012). The effects of Africentric United States history curriculum on Black student achievement. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 5(2), 91-96.

Lipka, J., Hogan, M.P., Webster, J.P., Yanez, E., Adams, B., Clark, S., & Lacy, D. (2005). Math in a cultural context: Two case studies of a successful culturally-based math project. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 36(4), 367-385.

McCarty, T.L. & Lee, T.S. (2014). Critically culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy and indigenous education sovereignty. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 101-124.

- 17 Good, J.C., Woodzicka, J.A., & Wingfield, L.C. (2010). The effects of gender stereotypic and counter-stereotypic textbook images on science performance. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 150(2), 132-147.

Kessels, U., Heyder, A., Latsch, M. & Hannover, B. (2014). How gender differences in academic engagement relate to students’ gender identity, *Educational Research*, 56(2), 220-229.

- 18 Möller, K. J. (2020, March). Reading and responding to LGBTQ-inclusive children’s literature in school settings: Considering the state of research on inclusion. *Language Arts*, 97(4), 235-251.

- 19 The study 2008 by R. Garth-McCullough is worth noting. She tested the relationship between African American students’ prior knowledge and the cultural orientation of stories (i.e., African American, Chinese American, or European American) on their comprehension of the stories. While including stories about Chinese Americans makes the curriculum more diverse and provides African American readers windows into

someone else's world, it was the African American themed stories that were most likely to engage the students.

See:

Garth-McCullough, R. (2008, October/November). Untapped cultural support: The influence of culturally bound prior knowledge on comprehension performance. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 48(1), 1-30. Retrieved January 7, 2022, at [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol49/iss1/3/](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol49/iss1/3/)