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Critical Representation: Mattering & Belonging for Students of the Global Majority

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Abstract

Critical representation in literature and curricula requires an emancipatory agenda and examination of the ways in which people of diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and other socially marginalized identities are portrayed, an assessment of how relevant, affirming, and accurate those representations are, and a consideration of the impact on a child's sense of self and 'other.' This essay includes sample audit criteria for critical representation highlighting five sections: Storyline & Sense of Justice; Affirmation & Self-Worth; Relationships Among People; Author/Illustrator Background; and Language & Terminology, all with a focus on 'mattering' and holistic wellbeing of students of the global majority. Audit criteria explicitly engage questions of critical race theory such as: Does the storyline encourage passive acceptance of inequity, or active resistance against it? Are there messages that limit or damage a child's aspirations or sense of self-worth? The essay concludes with examples of how practitioners are using the audit criteria to identify strengths, needs, and opportunities to improve their practice.

Critical Representation

Beyond calls to simply diversify text collections to include more people of the global majority, *critical representation* requires an examination of the ways in which people of diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and other socially marginalized identities are portrayed, an assessment of how relevant, affirming, and accurate those representations are, and a consideration of the impact on a child's sense of self and 'other.' Critical representation is about much more than diversity in literature; instead, it aims to help teachers evaluate school and classroom library collections through an educational justice lens that centers the mattering and holistic wellbeing of People of the Global Majority (PGM) and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPoC).

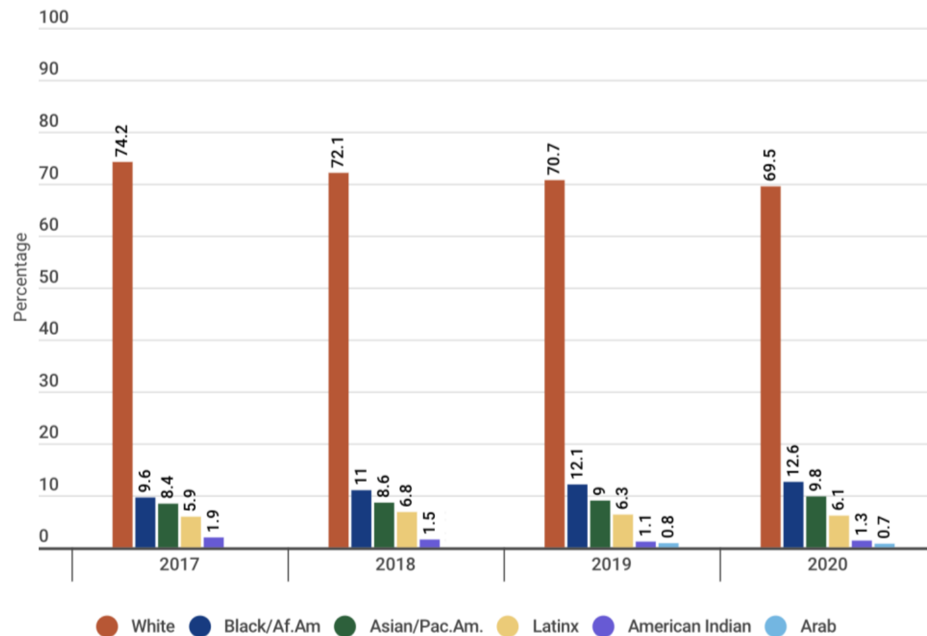
When curricula, literature, and other media sources repeatedly omit, gloss over, marginalize, or misrepresent the histories, voices, and significance of some racial and cultural groups while repeatedly centering the stories of more dominant groups, they are serving to uphold the current status quo, which is pitifully inadequate: less than 13% of newly published books in 2020 featured Black main characters, and less than 2% featured American Indian/Indigenous main characters.

However, critical representation in children's literature requires more than just increasing the number of 'diverse texts' in our libraries. It involves an emancipatory agenda that asks *how* people are represented, challenging oppressive power dynamics and curricular patterns by asking critical questions to assess and improve our collections and perhaps redefine what constitutes the core canon.

Think back to some of the books you loved as a child, the ones you could lose yourself in, the ones that expanded your sense of what's possible, and the ones that allowed you to feel seen, validated, and perhaps less alone. For many, this included books with characters who looked like us, sounded like us, and perhaps lived like us. These literary mirrors (Sims-Bishop, 1990) allow children to experience a sense of self-affirmation and belonging, and mattering. On the other hand, a lack of accurate, affirming, positive representation sends a different yet powerful message about the extent to which someone's story is worth telling, or how much they are de/valued by society.

Figure 1

Racial/Ethnic Representation of Main Characters in Newly Published Children's Books 2017-2020 (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2021).



Throughout my own K-12 experience, I encountered almost no Asian American representation in fiction, histories, perspectives, imagery, role models, teachers, nor any other indicators that Asian people were worth mentioning in the past or present. I did, however, encounter plenty of harmful stereotypes, imitations, caricatures, costumes, sayings, assumptions, and overt racism in literature, movies, television, social media, advertisements, curricula, and social interactions with friends and strangers alike. As a child, this left me wondering why I could not see myself reflected positively in the stories or curricula (or media, pop culture, elected leaders, or public art) around me. I was trying to understand why the stories I valued so much never seemed to value me. Dr. Bettina Love (2019) describes mattering as "the internal desire we all have for freedom, joy, restorative justice… and to matter to ourselves, our community, our family, and our country" (p. 7). Messages about mattering are constant, implicit, omnipresent, and often define the school culture more than any policy, rule, or written statement.

It is important to note that books like *The Indian in the Cupboard, Skippyjon Jones, Peter Pan,* and *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* all contain 'diverse' characters but are also packed with messages and imagery that exaggerate stereotypes, normalize racism, neutralize the horrors of enslavement, and fail to provide students with the affirming mirrors and messages they need. In other words, not all representation is affirming, and mere inclusion is not enough.

The lack of inclusive representation in children's literature is a longstanding and pervasive pattern, perhaps best represented by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2021) data below which collects data on new children's books published each year. Note: Figure 1 shows the race/ethnicity of main characters in the books; authors and publishers of the global majority are included in a different data set by the CCBC. Terms used to describe racial/ethnic groups are from the CCBC.

I first came across this data after a conversation with my undergraduate students in a teacher education program. We were talking about designing learning experiences for students from diverse cultural backgrounds when a few started talking about their perception of overrepresentation of BIPoC in curriculum, specifically Latinx/e sounding names in math problems and brown faces in children's literature. One student commented, *"It's like, everything has to be about diversity now. Isn't it going a little too far? Are we just trying too hard?"* The following class I shared the CCBC data with them and we had an important, uncomfortable conversation about the relationship between bias and curricular design, about our own degrees of social privilege and what we see as 'enough' or 'too much,' and the chasm between the negative impact of erasure and omission, and teachers' hearts full of best intent. This was not a political conversation. This was about all of our students, current and future, their social-emotional wellbeing, and our ability as educators to provide the conditions in which they can feel safe, seen, heard, valued, loved, cared for, supported, capable, and confident. This was not about blame, fault, or white guilt. This was a conversation about selves and how we show up for educational justice. The will to notice is prerequisite to shifting our behavior, both of which are necessary if we truly desire more equitable educational outcomes.

Impact on Students of the Global Majority

Year after year, so many students are left with no literary mirrors to affirm the existence and normalcy of people who look like them, and no conversations in the classroom about why this is the case. Students are left to make sense of that deficit, and often locate it within themselves (Lipsky, 2016; Pheterson, 1986). This dynamic of internalized racism is insidious, damaging, and has long-lasting effects. In contrast, when students see themselves positively reflected in curricula and literature, it is easier to envision themselves as *part* of their school community, experience a deep sense of belonging and connectedness, and develop the strong sense of self-worth we wish for all children (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2006). Relevant, affirming representations that reflect the identities of children provide opportunities for personal connections to curriculum (Brooks & McNair, 2015) and support students' beliefs that school is a place where they are valued. Further, positive reflections of students' cultural identities and backgrounds "generate feelings of worth, dignity, competence, and confidence that can facilitate academic, personal, social, and professional achievement" (Gay, 2000, p. 150). As many schools are approaching the work of examining curricula and library collections, it is important to keep this broader goal in mind. Normalizing the inclusion of all people has lasting impacts on a child's sense of self, as well as how they learn to perceive people different from themselves.

Building an Equity Lens: Audit Tools and Strategies to Evaluate Critical Representation

Excerpted from a more comprehensive audit tool, the criteria and critical questions in Table 1 provide guidance as teachers examine and self-assess their library collections. Tools like this are not a simple answer to the complex issues at hand; rather, they can help advance discussion within our professional learning communities, offer complex questions to assist in analysis and evaluation of text collections, help determine areas of need, raise important questions about belonging and mattering at school, and identify action steps to improve the school experience for all students.

Table 1

School Library Audit Sample Criteria: Critical Representation

Storyline: Sense of Justice	A. Does the storyline encourage passive acceptance of inequity, or active resistance against it? B. Is assimilation a goal? Are marginalized characters rewarded for becoming more like those with power? C. Do storylines avoid serious conflict with dominant culture?

	D. To what extent do concepts of justice and heroism address issues of social inequity? E. How are problems conceived, presented, and resolved in the story?
Affirmation and Self-Worth	A. Are there messages in the text that limit or damage any child's aspirations or sense of self-worth? B. Are certain groups of people valued more than other groups? C. Are groups of people presented in permanent, negative ways? D. Are individuals within groups portrayed as having unique aspirations, capacities, strengths, weaknesses, interests, values, goals, lifestyles, and beliefs? E. Are there “single stories” that reinforce or rely on stereotypes to present an essentialized narrative about a group of people? F. Are there varied texts that normalize differences throughout curricula rather than as a curricular add-on, only relevant during holidays, or relegated to the margins?
Relationships Among People	A. Who has power? Who is in leadership roles? Are there patterns? B. Do BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ folks, women, older people, or people with disabilities function in subservient or dominant roles? C. Do girls and women have strong healthy friendships with each other? How do other people influence their relationships? D. Does one group pity, save, or talk down to another?
Author and/or Illustrator Background	A. Analyze the biographical data available about the author and illustrator. If they are not a member of the group they are depicting, is there anything in their background that would indicate their authority on the topic? B. Is the author using terminology, referents, or details specific to a culture or group other than their own? If so, why? C. Is there any tokenization of sacred symbols, texts, images, holidays, traditions, rituals, or objects? D. Are historical facts, cultural referents, illustrations or images culturally or historically in/accurate?
Language	A. Is the language/terminology used affirming, up to date, accurate, respectful, and inclusive? B. Are there harmful terms used to label people, define people through a deficit lens, or reduce people to a condition they experience? C. Is there gender binary language present? (e.g., boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, his or her) D. Is there androcentric language present? (e.g., guys, forefathers, fellow, brethren, manpower, mankind, firemen, manmade, chairman)

Expected Pushback

Lack of representation, omission, and erasure are harmful, and for those who do not experience it, it can also be hard to notice. Like a fish in a fishbowl, learning to “see the water” all around us is not something many folks consider, and when we do, it takes conscious effort to sustain. In other words, learning to notice what has always been there, where injustice and inequity are present in our professional, individual, social, and relational spaces, and where it is normalized and deemed ‘just the way it is,’ first requires a willingness to see. Are we willing to do the hard and uncomfortable work of excavating some of our own biases, re-evaluating them, holding

them up against our own core values, and considering shifts in our language, behavior and curricular choices accordingly? Are we able to notice what is in our midst? When we think about whose perspectives are omitted, whose histories are erased, and whose faces are invisible throughout curricula, how might our own social identities such as race, dis/ability, gender, sexuality, or social class influence our analysis? What will we see as too much? What will warrant concern, and what will we simply see as normal? How do our own race or other identity markers impact our relationship to privilege and power? Critical questions like these help teachers engage in difficult, vulnerable conversations about the will to notice and the collaborative efforts, support, and accountability required to do better.

It is important to note that many people of the global majority (PGM) and people who have experienced invisibility, erasure, stereotyping, or misrepresentation in curricula might be more accustomed to noticing these patterns in literature, and more equipped to understand the impact on students. Listen to us. While it is crucial for white people not to require the emotional labor of PGM in order to better understand the impact of curricular harm, it is equally important to listen when we speak our truths and share how certain texts, content, and terminology land on us. This includes listening to students and colleagues of the global majority, LGBTQIA+ people, and other people who experience social marginalization. It also requires schools to respond to harm in ways that prioritize values such as inclusion, safety, acceptance, and thriving for all, and consider the relationship between 'intent' and 'impact.' This requires a recognition that inaction is not a neutral choice. When we learn that our literature, language, content, or pedagogy is harmful to someone in our care, we make a conscious choice to continue, or to shift.

Patterns, Applications, and Implications for Long-term Planning

In 2020, over 80% of teachers in the US identified as (only) white (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), compared to less than 47% of the nation's children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). While teacher demographics that more closely mirror student demographics would carry great benefits including greater cultural proficiency (Gershenson et al., 2021), lower levels of racial and cultural bias, and higher expectations for students of color (Delpit, 2006), there are also immediate implications for our present reality. In my work conducting curriculum audits with predominantly white teachers in PreK-12 schools over the last five years, perhaps the most consistent pattern is that teachers self-report being ready, willing, and eager to improve their curricula and library collections, but also need training, tools, practice, and continued discussion with guidance, support, compassion, and accountability. A broad goal of auditing, or self-evaluation, is to build fluency with the criteria so educators know what to look for and can respond accordingly. Teachers and school leaders are using equity audits to harness their will to notice, engage in critical conversations, and identify action steps, both immediate and long term.

PreK-12 teachers across northern New England have used these criteria to identify some strengths and areas of need in their collections. Strengths include: strong, positive representation of females, racially inclusive imagery and visual representation, and an emphasis on justice as a collective endeavor. They also identified some patterned areas of need including: overrepresentation of Eurocentric texts, characters, and curricular perspectives; reductionism and reinforcement of stereotypes; outdated or unaffirming language and terminology; limited family representation; non-inclusive school murals and artwork; ableism or invisibility of people with disabilities; and implied narratives about a person's worth based on their body, career, or cultural expressions. Some teachers also identified specific units of study in need of revision, for example, a fourth grade Westward Expansion unit that lacked Indigenous perspectives, and a third-grade science unit on inherited traits that equated the concept of family with only heterosexual parents who birth biological children. Many school districts conducting equity audits are using their initial findings as baseline data to inform multi-year equity action plans to move closer toward their vision for educational justice, and to bring their curricula more in line with their school and district missions and visions. Together as professional colleagues, teachers and school leaders are using equity audits to critically evaluate their curricula and pedagogy, continue to develop and strengthen their equity lens, and sharpen their focus through every opportunity to practice.

The ability to apply a strong equity lens to examinations of children's literature, curricula, and more broadly in everyday language use or social interactions are not easily or immediately acquired skills. Rather, a 'long game' approach to educational justice is required, wherein we continue to practice, sharpen the focus with each critical conversation, develop the will to notice, be able to be called-in or called-upon to do better, evaluate the need for action or change, examine how one's own social positionality impacts our interpretations, and consider the social-emotional wellbeing and sense of school belonging that are crucial to the success of all students. It is time to move toward more intentional and accountable integration of affirming, joyful, respectful, authentic, validating, and engaging representation of people of the global majority throughout curricula, literature, and library collections in schools.

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