



For curriculum quality, cultural representation matters

BY TANJI REED MARSHALL

Curriculum is a critical force through which students receive the tacit message of their value in society. They learn which groups of people are valued and whose stories are worth learning. For too long, some students' and communities' stories have been deemed unworthy.

While some progress has been made, the curriculum students are

forced to consume continues to evidence the sentiments of Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Week (now Black History Month) and a distinguished educator whose theories shaped many scholars of color who remain absent from the canon of educational research and practice.

In 1933, Woodson wrote: "If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. When

you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one."

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Students of color have been relegated to the back door of the American education system since its inception centuries ago, and curriculum has been an instrument of that oppression. The ongoing absence of historical accuracy and fullness and the mis- and underrepresentation of people of color continue to demonstrate the degree to which we have not yet overcome.

We remain largely stuck in our ways, with many curricula continuing to tell a single story of American greatness while skirting over, lightly touching, or leaving out those who paid the price for this country to be what it is, at least on paper.

As this country continues to face ourselves in what is often an unpleasant mirror, what students are learning is paramount. Students need opportunities to learn about the dynamics of our past to ensure we become the country we so proudly say we are, but struggle to actually be.

Access to a robust curriculum can be one vehicle toward attaining our ideals — if that curriculum is one that is more than a conveyor belt of disconnected, decontextualized facts and figures or stories about people as singularly heroic when the truth

is far more complex and dynamic. Students need opportunities to see themselves and others portrayed in texts in meaningful ways that challenge stereotypes and push them toward advanced levels of literacy.

While as Alfred Tatum, a literacy expert who focuses on African American students, says, “every text belongs to every child,” we must ensure a balanced representation across and within learning tools. Students must have experiences with texts being windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990).

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Through the language and images in curriculum, students are able to gain knowledge about what it means to be an American. Unfortunately, far too much of what most curricula contains is a single story (Adichie, 2013) of American greatness without attending to the cost of such supposed greatness.

Students learn about our principles of freedom, liberty, and democracy for all; however, there is no guarantee they will learn such freedom came at the expense of Indigenous people’s near-genocide or that it was withheld from Indigenous people until 1924, with the passage of the Indian Citizen Act.

They’ll learn about voting rights for women, but are not guaranteed to learn that African American women were locked out of the conversation by the much-heralded women’s suffragists such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Alice Paul.

Literary texts parade a steady diet of representational singularity in much the same way as history texts. While there has been progress from 2012, when character representations were first counted, by 2018, animals are still represented in texts at a higher percentage than any group except characters that could be identified as white (Dahlen, 2016, 2019).

In an unpublished study of over 1,000 texts deemed as high quality, the Education Trust found more than two-thirds were authored by individuals identified as white. In this same review, Ed Trust found that males were the predominant authors of text for all racial/ethnic groups except writers of Asian and Latinx descent.

The emphasis on texts being high-quality does not seem to consider such factors as the representation of writers and characters, which speaks to a limited definition on what makes texts high quality.

At the same time, dozens of state

legislatures across the country are taking steps to outlaw the discussion of race from classrooms under the guise of bans on so-called critical race theory. In many parts of the U.S., groups of white parents are rallying to protect the emotions of their children who, for the first time, might be learning the deep and dynamic — and unsettling — history of this country.

Yet they are not raising similar concerns about the emotions of students of color or students whose families are experiencing economic distress, uncertainty, homelessness, and a number of society's other ills, even though these students have long been made to feel uncomfortable in schools.

Now, these groups of parents and legislators have turned their sights to eradicating culturally responsive teaching and curriculum as well as social and emotional learning.

WHERE WE NEED TO GO

In this context, leaders have important decisions to make. They must decide if they will allow Woodson's quote to live anew in the 21st century or if they will equip themselves and their teachers with the tools necessary to fight against the false narratives. They must decide whether their responsibility to every child will be trumped by a need to assuage the unrealistic fears of the few.

Curriculum can be an important lever for system-level change. Ensuring every child has access to a high-quality curriculum can be ground zero for one of the core tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy: academic achievement.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) elevated academic achievement as an essential factor in being culturally relevant because when educators don't believe that children of color can and should succeed academically, students experience under- and miseducation.

We see the effects of belief gaps outlined three years ago in TNTP's *Opportunity Myth* (TNTP, 2018) and in its current work with Zearn (TNTP, 2021) where researchers found students

CURRICULUM EVALUATION TOOLS

- Assessing Bias in Standards and Curricular Matter (Great Lakes Equity Center)
- Culturally Responsive English Language Arts Curriculum Scorecard (New York University)
- Guidelines for Improving English Language Arts Materials for English Learners (English Learners Success Forum)
- Improving Representation and Diversity in Open Education Materials (OpenStax, 2020)
- The Knowledge Map (Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy)
- New York State Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Framework (New York State Education Department & The New York University Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools)
- Social Justice Standards – The Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework (Teaching Tolerance/Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018)

in schools designated as high-poverty and those with higher populations of Black, Latino, and Native American students are more likely to be academically remediated even when they have demonstrated mastery on core content than their Asian-descended and white counterparts.

Educators' beliefs about students' competence and potential affect the quality of the curriculum students have access to and the outcomes students are able to achieve. Every student having access to high-quality curriculum is a critical first step in moving toward system-level academic change.

Unfortunately, high-quality alone, as currently defined, is insufficient. Many districts already make use of EdReports' evaluations and similar tools to determine the quality of curriculum. But most definitions of high-quality do not consider ways authors may be telling stories or how characters may be represented.

District and state leaders need tools to help them better understand elements of cultural relevance, responsiveness, and sustainability and whether they are embodied in curricula. Fortunately, such evaluation tools are emerging.

For example, the Institute for

Education Policy at Johns Hopkins offers the Knowledge Map, designed to analyze curriculum in terms of the knowledge it offers students about their world and the human condition. It looks at the topics offered in curriculum and, in doing so, tacitly addresses the narratives and messages the curriculum sends, especially in nonfiction texts and units. Through this tool, districts can gain insight into the strengths and challenges of the content of their curriculum.

Leaders should consider what the curriculum contains and what it omits. The omissions are important because it is through understanding what is left out that leaders can help teams explore how to make curriculum more complete. While the Knowledge Map does not explicitly address race, ethnicity, gender, and other factors of representation, it does offer leaders a window into the state of their curriculum and the needs for expanding topics.

Other tools support districts in leaning into cultural relevance, responsiveness, and sustainability, and can help leaders begin to uncover bias in curriculum. Great Lakes Equity Center, New York State Education Department, Learning for Justice

(formerly called Teaching Tolerance), OpenStax, English Learners Success Forum, and New York University all have tools equipping educators with the skills to evaluate curriculum through a culturally responsive and relevant lens. (See list on p. 58.)

By using such tools, system leaders can support building leaders, curriculum leaders, coaches, and classroom teachers in fine-tuning their eyes to see where groups of people are misrepresented or even left out of the stories students are asked to consume in their learning.

KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

When employing tools for evaluating cultural responsiveness, there are several questions to consider:

What is prompting a review of curriculum? You will need clarity before embarking on any review to make sure a review is being done to uncover authentic information, not to satisfy or defend against unfounded accusations.

What are the aims of a curriculum review? This question provides focus, which will allow choosing the proper tool. Not every tool is useful for every type of review.

Who will conduct the curriculum review? A well-rounded group of stakeholders will make the process more transparent and foster good will across the district and in the community.

What support is needed to execute a curriculum review? Training and professional learning are essential to ensure the process is completed within the framework chosen. A lack of professional learning will yield inaccurate results and bias the process. Many tools are designed to be self-directed; however, having the right team to prepare and support evaluators is crucial for a successful analysis.

How will findings be shared? Knowing how and to whom the findings will be shared should be determined in advance as well as the mechanism for sharing.

- Will findings be shared with

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school board members?

- Will findings be shared with community stakeholders?
- Will findings be shared only with school-based staff?

What funds are needed to execute the review? It is important to be realistic about funding such a project as it will be time-consuming.

- Is the district poised to solicit external funding from a local or national funder to complete this work?

How will the district respond to the findings? The district must have a proactive plan for how to take steps in response to the results. The specific steps should not be determined until the results are known, but it is reasonable to expect that curriculum changes will be needed.

To be responsive and meet students' needs, you might not be able to wait until the state adoption timetable to make changes, so consider how you can take action sooner if necessary. Being prepared fiscally is essential.

Taking these steps in a timely and proactive way messages to the community the importance of this endeavor; sitting on the results for a long time or failing to make changes will only erode trust.

Having an eye toward the logistics of a curriculum review will make the process successful and let district stakeholders know the leader is serious about addressing the need for every student to have access to a high-quality curriculum that is culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining.

While our nation continues to diversify, students can no longer be

relegated to the margins of learning through staid curricula designed to tell incomplete stories and render them stuck in a wave of stereotypes. Leaders have a responsibility to ensure all students have the opportunity to see themselves and others in the pages of the material they are charged to consume.

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