



If we are going to offer counter-narratives that challenge the single story that minimizes the contributions of minoritized communities, we need to do so overtly and with deliberate intention.

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DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

Nader I. Twal

'WHERE ARE THE BLACK SCIENTISTS?' MY SON ASKED

During a recent car ride, my youngest son, who is African American, casually said, "Mommy, white people are better than Black people." My wife's heart dropped as she mustered a response. "Why would you say that, honey?" she asked him. Without missing a beat, our son said, "Because there are more of them than Black people."

His two biracial older brothers, who are intensely protective of him, chimed in immediately. "But think about all of the amazing Black people in our lives, like our friends, and all of the people we have learned about from history!" Again, without missing a beat, our youngest said, "But who are the Black scientists? I want to be a scientist. Are there Black scientists? Where are they?" The car fell silent as everyone bore the weight of his questions.

As a foster-to-adopt family who worked fiercely to reunify our youngest with his birth family and now fiercely love him as his forever family, we take the responsibility to center his Blackness as a serious one.

His identity development needs to be deliberate on our part. So we buy books by African Americans, enrolled our kids in a public school where Black children make up a significant percentage of students and are outnumbered only by Latinx students, and stay connected to his birth family and their traditions. But our efforts are outnumbered by the messages inundating his young mind about the inferiority of Black people. As we probed more deeply, our son began to reveal that he feels invisible because he doesn't see himself in the world around him, despite our best efforts.

One of the reasons is the omission of Black excellence from dominant narratives, including those taught in school books. From these books, our son has heard about some Black changemakers from history like Martin Luther King Jr. and George Washington Carver. But he hasn't heard about astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson or astronaut Jessica Watkins or inventor Lonnie Johnson or so many other Black innovators who are changing the world right now.

As a result, he feels like Black people are a side note, not part of the main story of society. Even though he knows he is loved at home and at school — and would articulate that to anyone who asks — he feels unseen. And I know he is not the only one.

This issue of *The Learning Professional* focuses on teaching during difficult times, and the teaching that feels most pressing in this moment is the teaching we have to do with adults about centering all students' identities and ensuring that all people — especially those who have been historically marginalized — feel seen.

One place to start is with the people who determine what gets taught and how. When teachers and administrators walk into schools, they are typically greeted with materials from publishers who have not prioritized diversity. This includes not only curriculum materials, but



also trade books used for independent and group reading. When the Becker Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago examined representation in more than 1,000 award-winning children's books, they found that, in mainstream books, the percentage of light-skinned people actually increased over the last two decades (Adukia et al., 2021), despite a growing recognition of the importance of representation. (Books in the diversity collection — those that were selected for awards based on their diverse representation — depicted more characters of color.) Furthermore, children in these texts were more likely to have light skin than adults in the same books.

We need to acknowledge that the gap in reading materials about darker skinned people, especially

children, exists, and we need to actively work to redress it. We need to work with publishers to center these narratives, rather than relegating them to footnotes or margins. We need to partner with and better equip our librarians and educators to fill these gaps in their curriculum while publishers catch up. If we are going to offer counternarratives that challenge the single story that minimizes the contributions of minoritized communities, we need to do so overtly and with deliberate intention.

Every one of us needs to do this work. As an educator myself, I know I need to do better, even though I think that I am already trying my best. Before we can teach our students, we may need to admit that we, too, have been consumers of these texts and may have internalized the subtle messages

hidden in their pages. Until we do, I wonder how many other children of color will find themselves asking the same question as my son. But if we do our jobs well, students like him will never have to ask, "Where are the Black scientists?" because they will be surrounded by images and examples of such excellence wherever they turn.

REFERENCE

Adukia, A., Eble, A., Harrison, E., Runesha, H.B., & Szasz, T. (2021, April 12). *What we teach about race and gender: Representation in images and text of children's books.* Becker Friedman Institute. bfi.uchicago.edu/insight/research-summary/what-we-teach-about-race-and-gender-representation-in-images-and-text-of-childrens-books/ ■



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