



What Are Books That Represent Diversity?

How old were you when you first saw yourself reflected in a book? Some people were quite young—they saw themselves in Nancy Drew, Harry Potter, or Junie B. Jones, and in characters in series like Fudge and Magic Tree House. If you're having a difficult time remembering when you first saw yourself in a book, it might be because seeing yourself reflected in books is not something you ever really thought about before; it's normal. Like most characters, Nancy Drew and Harry Potter present White, able-bodied, heteronormative characters. However, these characters are not representative of many students.

In this chapter we explain what diverse books are and why they are critically important for all students. We then provide tools to help you complete a classroom or anthology audit to see what forms of diversity are already represented and expose what is missing.

CHAPTER 1



Books that represent diversity reflect the lived, authentic experiences of diverse people and are critically important to share with all students. They can serve as mirrors that reflect students' realities, windows that allow them to see into different worlds, or doors that help them enter different worlds.

Who Gets to Be in Books?








Students of color, multilingual students, LGBTQ+ students, students with diverse dis/abilities, and other students with “differences” have not traditionally been represented in children’s books and therefore do not see themselves reflected in texts. Curricula materials also tend to omit these students and their perspectives. In fact, as of 2021, 2% of books published in the United States included Native American characters, 7% included Latinx characters, 11% included Asian/Pacific Islander characters, and 14% included African or African American characters. In contrast, over 60% of books had White characters or avoided the issue altogether by using animals or other nonhumans as characters (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2022).

“Students of color, multilingual students, LGBTQ+ students, students with diverse dis/abilities ... have not traditionally been represented in children’s books and therefore do not see themselves reflected in texts.”

If we want to include diversity in our classroom libraries, we need to be intentional about it. Thankfully, with a lot of focus and a handful of strategies, you can choose to include texts that represent your students—which makes them culturally relevant texts—in your classroom and curriculum. First, let’s take some time to explain what we mean by diverse texts.

Diversity in Children’s Books, 2021

The following chart indicates the percentage of U.S. published books during 2021 depicting children from diverse backgrounds or written by authors from diverse backgrounds. Note: Due to the pandemic, some publishers didn’t send out review copies, so the total volume of books represented may be lower than usual.

							
Race/Ethnicity	Black/ African	Indigenous	Asian	Latinx	Pacific Islander	Arab	White/ Other
% depicting children from diverse backgrounds	14%	2%	11%	7%	<1%	1%	64%*
% written by authors from diverse backgrounds	10%	1%	15%	10%	<1%	1%	62%

Data provided by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-about-poc-fnn/>

*In 2021, CCBC did not explicitly report data for White characters/authors, nor did they distinguish the percentage of literary texts featuring animal or other nonhuman characters. The percentage shown in the White/Other column is representative of all other characters or authors combined.

Read this!

Johnson, N. J., Koss, M. D., & Martinez, M. (2018). Through the sliding glass door: #EmpowerTheReader. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(5), 569–577. This article addresses the importance of knowing our students as readers in order to connect them to books that might serve as “sliding glass doors” that open up new worlds to the students.

Who Needs to Be in Books?

Looking at the data on the previous page makes it abundantly clear that many voices are missing from our texts. For example, Latinx Americans of the United States make up almost 20% of the population, yet are only represented in 7% of the characters and content in books. Just think of how little of that 7% actually finds its way into our classrooms. The children are there, but their stories are not.

Books that represent diversity are stories that tell the lived experiences of humans as we are and that reflect all of our human realities. They include authentic, well-developed characters that are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). They include characters from non-Christian religions, multilingual characters, LGBTQ+ characters, working-class characters, and characters with dis/abilities and mental health challenges. Characters may live in different countries or be from different countries. We know that one book alone will likely not tell a student’s full experience, nor does it have to. Casting the net wide increases the chances that all students have the opportunity to see more of themselves on the page.

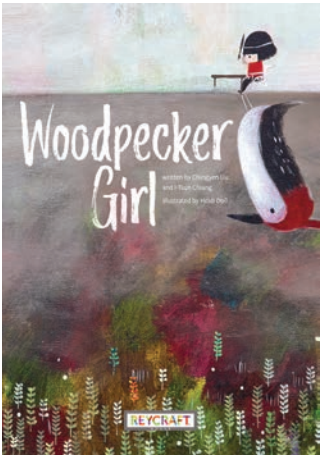


All students benefit from seeing themselves represented in texts.

Expressions of Text Diversity

Some books represent diversity by making the “diverse” identity the central topic in the story. For example, *10,000 Dresses* written by Marcus Ewert tells the story of a transgender girl dreaming of her first dress and her parents telling her boys don’t wear dresses. In *Miss Little’s Gift*, author Douglas Wood tells his personal story of learning to read with ADHD. Sometimes these stories are told through animal characters instead of human characters. For example, in *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant’s Tale*, Duncan Tonatiuh tells a story about the hardships experienced by families separated by borders and young Pancho Rabbit’s journey to help his father return home. Although the characters are not human, it is clear that the story is an immigrant tale from a Latinx person’s point of view, based on its subtitle, story line, and character names.

Other books represent diversity by including characters with diverse identities facing the everyday struggles that all young people face. The characters’ diverse identities are not the central focus in these stories. For example, *Zara’s Big Messy Day (That Turned Out Okay)* written by Rebekah Borucki tells the story of seven-year-old Zara, who struggles with managing her emotions when she faces stressful situations. Like all children (and adults), Zara gets anxious at times. It is only through the illustrations that we can see that Zara is biracial and has a Black mom and a White dad. The central focus of the book is not Zara’s racial identity, but learning about how to manage emotions through visualization meditation. Borucki’s book features many multiracial characters without calling attention to their race in the text. This choice begins to normalize and humanize biracial characters in children’s books.



Woodpecker Girl

Quick Tip

Don't make assumptions about an author's background based on the characters or topic. If you are specifically looking for stories told from voices within that culture, do a little research.

Diverse books are especially powerful when written by authors from the communities they write about or by authors with personal knowledge about the experiences. This helps ensure that the stories are authentic and told *by* (instead of told *about*) communities. Sometimes, it is easy to learn about the diversity of the author by the pictures or information included on the back cover or inside jacket. Other times, learning more about the author will require that we dedicate a few minutes to online investigation.

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My Hands Tell a Story



Hatari! Danger!

A Sample of Diverse Texts

We have put together a list of diverse texts in Table 1.1 to help you expand your classroom bookshelves. We selected the books because they meet the following criteria (adapted from Pennell et al., 2018):

- The characters are portrayed authentically and not pitied or patronized. The book uses respectful language. Our quick test: *Would we be embarrassed to read the book aloud in front of students from the diverse community being portrayed in the book?* If the answer was “Yes” or “Maybe,” then we did not include the book in our list.
- The book is engaging and could be interesting to students from the diverse community being represented. Furthermore, students might be able to identify with the story and make meaningful connections.
- The book is easily available from booksellers.

At this stage, we are introducing diverse texts and identifying some possible characteristics. **Chapter 2** explains why we should use them with all students, and **Chapter 3** explains how to analyze and select them. **Chapters 4 and 5** show how diverse books can be used in a wide range of ways in any classroom.

Table 1.1 Diverse Texts

	Diverse Authors/ Illustrators	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Characters	Immigrant Characters	Religious Diversity
10,000 Dresses by Marcus Ewert	X			
Miss Little’s Gift by Douglas Wood	X			
Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant’s Tale by Duncan Tonatuih	X		X	
Zara’s Big Messy Day (That Turned Out Okay) by Rebekah Borucki	X	X		
One Word from Sophia by Jim Averbeck and Yasmeen Ismail	X	X		
Antonio’s Card/La tarjeta de Antonio by Rigoberto González	X	X		
Love by Matt de la Peña	X	X		X
The Powwow Thief by Joseph Bruchac	X	X		
Woodpecker Girl by Chingyen Liu and I-Tsun Chiang	X	X		
47,000 Beads by Koja Adeyoha and Angel Adeyoha	X	X		X
Moondragon in the Mosque Garden by El-Farouk Khaki and Troy Jackson	X	X		X
Ajeet Singh: The Invincible Lion by Bhajneet Singh and Guru Arjan Dev Ji	X			X
King for a Day by Rukhsana Khan	X	X		X
Yo Soy Muslim: A Father’s Letter to His Daughter by Mark Gonzales	X	X		X
They Call Me Mix/Me Llanan Maestre by Lourdes Rivas	X	X		

Multilingualism	LGBTQ+ Themes	Characters from Working Class	Characters with Dis/abilities	Other Diverse Factors (e.g., Mental Health)
	X			
			X	
X		X		
				X
X	X			
		X	X	
			X	
X				
	X			
		X	X	
X			X	
X	X			

Read this!

Iwai, Y. (2015). Using multicultural children's literature to teach diverse perspectives. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 51(2), 81–86. This article presents five tips for including diverse children's literature in your classroom, and includes a list of books and resources.

Benefits for Every Student

Books that represent diversity are for all children and young people. All readers deserve to experience the joy and connection found by reading stories about characters they can relate to. Furthermore, all readers deserve the opportunity to learn about the lives and experiences of people different from themselves. It is important to remember that the same book will reflect the everyday life experiences of some children and provide other children with a window into other people's lives. The opportunity to view texts through these multiple lenses creates the space for lifelong acceptance of one's self and others.

You may be asking yourself, "How will I know if the books on my classroom shelves reflect the lives of students in my class?" One way is to get to know your students and talk with them about their lives outside of school. In her book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (2020), Dr. Gholdy Muhammad offers great prompts and questions you can ask students to get to know who they are as people. Here is a sample of responses completed by Isaias Aceves, a fourth-grade dual language student in Orland Unified School District in California.

“Books that represent diversity are for all children and young people. All readers deserve to experience the joy and connection found by reading stories about characters they can relate to.”

- How would you describe yourself to someone who didn't know you?

Soy amable y responsable. Me encanta jugar con mis hermanos y amigos.

I am kind and responsible. I love to play with my siblings and friends.

- What would your other teachers say about you?

Dicen que soy un buen estudiante. Que soy amable y cariñoso.

They would say that I am a good student. That I am kind and loving.

- What would your family say about you?

Mi familia dice que tengo un gran corazón. Que soy bueno en fútbol.

My family says that I have a big heart. That I am good at soccer.

- How might you describe your culture and ethnicity?

Mi cultura y etnia es alegre, llena de colores, música y baile.

My culture and ethnicity is cheerful, filled with colors, music, and dance.

- If you could take me somewhere to help me understand your culture/ethnicity, where would you take me?

Te llevaría a México. También a una fiesta donde se puede comer comida de mi cultura como tamales y frioles y arroz.

I would take you to Mexico. Also to a party where you could eat food from my culture, like tamales, beans, and rice.

Quick Tip

Some children may not feel comfortable talking about their lives. Don't force it! Remember, our students are not obligated to share their personal stories and when they do it is a privilege. Instead, take time to build their trust and observe how they respond to the texts that you read.

Questions from CULTIVATING GENIUS by Gholdy Muhammad. Copyright © 2020 by Gholdy Muhammad. Reprinted by permission of Scholastic Inc.



Examining our classroom libraries from the perspective of diversity can be intimidating. We may have too many books, not enough books, or be unsure of what we will find. Completing an audit of your classroom library helps to identify what you really have and what books you might add to your wish list. We’ve provided these tools first because they can be completed before the school year begins. You do not need to complete the entire audit at once—you can spend 20 minutes after school each day for a week or two and accomplish the task. If you identify books that seem problematic, set them aside for now; we’ll come back to those later in the book.

Tool 1.1 Classroom Library Audit: Overview

This tool helps you determine what topics are currently addressed by the texts in your classroom. If your school uses a published reading program for its Language Arts curriculum, you could also use this tool to audit the texts in these materials. Use a tally mark to identify the ways each text addresses diversity through either the characters or book creators. This will enable you to see an overview of the aspects of diversity currently represented in your library, and where you may have gaps.



Classroom library audits help you identify which aspects of diversity are currently represented and where you may have gaps.

Tool 1.1 Classroom Library Audit: Overview

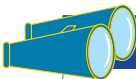
Authentic Representation of:	Author/Illustrator	Character(s)
Asian person		
Black person		
Immigrant or refugee experience		
Indigenous person		
Latinx person		
LGBTQ+ community		
Local author or setting		
Non-Christian faith		
Person or community outside the U.S.		
Person with learning dis/ability		
Person with physical dis/ability		
Southeast Asian person		
Speaker of another language		
[insert your own criteria]		
[insert your own criteria]		
[insert your own criteria]		
[insert your own criteria]		

Read this!

For additional information and another approach to auditing your classroom library, read Fishman-Weaver’s (2019) article, “How to Audit Your Classroom Library for Diversity.”

Tool 1.2 Classroom Library Audit: In-Depth

This tool supports an in-depth audit to give deeper understanding of what types of books you have, and which type(s) you may need. Pick up each book and look at the author, illustrator, and main characters, then carefully read the text. In the first column, write the title of the book or text and the author(s). Then, identify the various ways the book or text addresses diversity in each of the columns. For a more advanced approach, use a black pen for books that simply provide representation in each of the categories, and a different color for books that provide an abolitionist or transformative perspective.



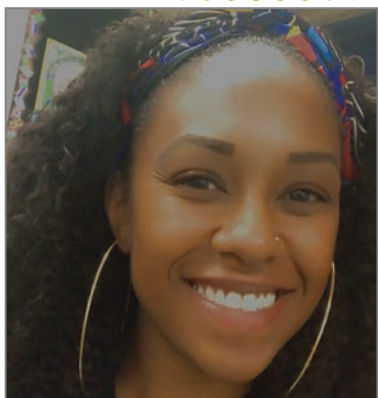
Looking Ahead

- **Chapter 2** provides tools to help you get to know your students and consider how they might relate to different texts.
- **Chapter 3** provides tools to help you analyze and assess how well books address diversity.

Tool 1.2 Classroom Library Audit: In-Depth

Diversity Characteristics	BIPOC Characters	Characters with Dis/abilities	Characters from Working Class	Immigrant Characters	LGBTQ+ Themes	Multi-lingualism	Religious Diversity
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Voices from the Field



Ashley Martin
teacher

“I had a student in my class who is African American, and I was her first Black teacher.”

Ashley Martin is an experienced teacher in Mount Pleasant Elementary School District in California. A Black teacher, Ashley recalled the first time she saw herself in a book as a child. She said, “When I really think back, it was *The Doorbell Rang* by Pat Hutchins. I don’t even know if they talked, but I just remember seeing them. I thought, ‘Oh, there are Black characters!’ At the time, I didn’t think you could even color in that shade. After that, the only other time I can remember seeing Black characters in childhood was the American Girl® dolls and their books. The Black doll, Addy®, was a slave; her story was about slavery. They had different time periods, but hers was the only story that had some type of hardship; the others had their own bedrooms.”

Ashley works in an urban, under-resourced school district with high percentages of Latinx students, categorized as English Learners, and students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, but very few Black students. This past school year, she explained, “I had a student in my class who is African American, and I was her first Black teacher.”

She continued, “The student had issues with her hair and feeling like she didn’t belong. And so I told myself, the first day of class, we’re going to read *I Love My Hair!* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley. When we read it, she was like, ‘This is the book for me, I love it!’ But then I thought, ‘Okay, so how do I connect that book to my other students?’ Other students talked about how their hair is different from a family member’s, or their hair is curly versus straight or different colors. So they’re able to identify, ‘That’s not me, but I have some similar experience.’ They know I’m Black and that one student is Black. But that was the first time they had those conversations and said, ‘Okay, I’m not Black, but I’ve also been discriminated against, or I’ve felt like I didn’t belong.’ We talked about Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Latinx, and African Americans.”

Ashley recommended a few books that she likes to read to her students to start off the school year. She said, “My goal is to have them feel comfortable and know the classroom is a safe space. So I try to get books that represent a broad spectrum to hopefully hit everybody. *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold is a really good one. *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson is probably my favorite. I use *Our Class Is a Family* by Shannon Olsen to set our class expectations because it shows the diversity of different people and how we can be a family even though we may not look like a family. Those are usually my top three. My goal was to expose them to people and things that they weren’t used to seeing. Typically in schools we’re around the same type of people. So I love books that expose students to difference. I don’t want to wait for them to encounter someone and not know how to act or what to say. If you see someone that has a disability, and you’ve read about that disability before, you’re more aware that this person is a human being. I like to expose them to as much as possible so that by the time they get into the real world, they’re like, ‘Oh, I’ve seen something like this before.’”

Ashley continued, “Last year we analyzed the books and talked about who wasn’t represented in the books. I called them my changemaker group, because they were so aware of the world around them. They were really good at asking, ‘Well, what about this character? Why wasn’t this character put into the book?’ It’s joyful to be around them.”

Voices from the Field



Claire Hood
teacher

"I think using picture books... is extremely effective. Because you get to have good comprehension conversations.... I would use them in middle school as well. That's what we did this year [in fifth grade]. We did a lot of picture books."

Claire Hood is an experienced White teacher in Santa Clara Unified School District in California. Having changed districts from Oakland, California, which has a larger Black population than her current school, Claire realized she needed to make some adjustments to her classroom library. She explained, "I have not had any Black students at this school. But a ton of my library is about Black history. So I thought, I need to diversify because I don't have texts that match my Latinx kids or my students from India. It's important to keep getting new books. You have to keep changing the library to update it. And also make sure that you have read the book before you read it to the class."

She explained, "I think some of the books that I really like to use are ones that reflect my students in a way that they can see themselves immediately and get that kind of connection. It's important to keep up-to-date with what's coming out, and how you can support diverse authors." When asked how she keeps up-to-date with new books, Claire mentioned the website BookRiot (<https://bookriot.com/>) or an Internet search for "best new diverse children's books."

Claire has taught fifth grade as well as kindergarten. She commented on the use of diverse picture books across the grades, saying, "I think using picture books, even with fifth grade, is extremely effective. Because you get to have good comprehension conversations, even though it is a picture book. I would use them in middle school as well. That's what we did this year [in fifth grade]. We did a lot of picture books."

When asked to compare what those conversations looked like in fifth grade compared to kindergarten, Claire said that fifth graders "have more background knowledge, so the conversations have more depth. In kindergarten you're often introducing a topic that they kind of know but don't have a name for. So that takes a bit more scaffolding. But with fifth grade, when you're reading a book about a student living in poverty and trying to find beauty around her, students are able to make the connections with poverty. So I think, with upper-grade kids, you get to delve a little bit deeper, but your job is still kind of the same where you want to facilitate and not run the whole conversation. If students didn't know about gay rights, for example, they get to learn it in a conversation from kids who have a little bit more background. So the kids really get to teach each other more. The conversations flow better. The students are open to everything."