

Seven Forms of Bias in Instructional Materials

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Some Practical Ideas for Confronting Curricular Bias

Back in the 1970s and the 1980s, publishers and professional associations issued guidelines for non-racist and non-sexist books. As a result, texts of the last twenty years are much improved. Unfortunately, they are far from bias-free. The following seven forms of bias can be found not only in K-12 textbooks, but also in college texts, in the media – in fact, they are all around us. Feel free to explore these definitions with your students, as well as try the strategies suggested.

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Invisibility: What You Don't See Makes a Lasting Impression.

The most fundamental and oldest form of bias in instructional materials is the complete or relative exclusion of a group. Textbooks published prior to the 1960s largely omitted African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans from both the narrative and illustrations. Many of today's textbooks are improved, but far from perfect. Women, those with disabilities, gays and homosexuals continue to be missing from many of today's texts.

Stereotyping: Shortcuts to Bigotry.

Perhaps the most familiar form of bias is the stereotype, which assigns a rigid set of characteristics to all members of a group, at the cost of individual attributes and differences. While stereotypes can be positive, they are more often negative. Some typical stereotypes include:

- Men portrayed as assertive and successful in their jobs, but rarely discussed as husbands or fathers.
- Women as caregivers
- Jews as rich

Imbalance and Selectivity: A Tale Half Told.

Curriculum may perpetuate bias by presenting only one interpretation of an issue, situation, or group of people. Such accounts simplify and distort complex issues by omitting different perspectives.

- A text reports that women were "given" the vote, but does not discuss the work, sacrifices, and even physical abuse suffered by the leaders of the suffrage movement that "won" the vote.
- Literature is drawn primarily from western, male authors.
- Math and science courses typically reference European discoveries and formulas.

Unreality: Rose Colored Glasses.

Many researchers have noted the tendency of instructional materials to gloss over unpleasant facts and events in our history. By ignoring prejudice, racism, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, sexism, and inter-group conflict, we deny students the information they need to recognize, understand, and perhaps some day conquer societal problems. Examples include:

- Because of affirmative action programs, people of color and women now enjoy economic and political equality with (or superiority over) white males.
- The notion that technology will resolve persistent social problems.

Fragmentation and Isolation: The Parts Are Less than the Whole.

Did you ever notice a "special" chapter or insert appearing in a text? For example, a chapter on "Bootleggers, Suffragettes, and Other Diversions" or a box describing "Ten Black Achievers in Science." Fragmentation emerges when a group is physically or visually isolated in the text. Often, racial and ethnic group members are depicted as interacting only with persons like themselves, isolated from other cultural communities. While this form of bias may be less damaging than omission or stereotypes, fragmentation and isolation present non-dominant groups as peripheral members of society.

Linguistic Bias: Words Count.

Language can be a powerful conveyor of bias, in both blatant and subtle forms. Linguistic bias can impact race/ethnicity, gender, accents, age, (dis)ability and sexual orientation.

- Native Americans described as "roaming," "wandering," or "roving" across the land. Such language implicitly justifies the seizure of Native lands by "more goal-directed" white Americans who "traveled" or "settled" their way westward.
- Such words as forefathers, mankind, and businessman serve to deny the contributions (even the existence) of females.
- The bias against non-English speakers.

Cosmetic Bias: "Shiny" covers.

The relatively new cosmetic bias suggests that a text is bias free, but beyond the attractive covers, photos, or posters, bias persists. This "illusion of equity" is really a marketing strategy to give a favorable impression to potential purchasers who only flip the pages of books.

- A science textbook that features a glossy pullout of female scientists but includes precious little narrative of the scientific contributions of women.
- A music book with an eye-catching, multiethnic cover that projects a world of diverse songs and symphonies belies the traditional white male composers lurking behind the cover.

Investigative Strategies for Bias Detectives

Here are several strategies for teaching these concepts in K-12 and teacher education classrooms. Ask students to review school textbooks and identify each of these seven forms. Then ask them to suggest ways to remove the bias and create more equitable textbooks.

- Extend this activity by asking students to identify these forms of bias in college level texts (academic areas as well as teacher education), or in magazines and television programming.
- While curriculum bias clearly impacts females and students of color, males can also be victims as well. Using the 7 forms of bias as a framework, find examples that negatively impacts males, and suggest ways to overcome the bias.
- Ask students to identify how these seven forms emerge in interpersonal interactions. For example, teachers stereotype when males are asked to help with physical classroom tasks, or fragment by studying African Americans only during "Black History Month."

Share an example of curriculum bias or equity that you have identified.

