

In What Ways Does Representation in Student Curriculum Improve Engagement?

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AFT Teacher Leadership Program

Rio Rancho School Employee's Union

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Research Question: In What Ways Does Representation in Student Curriculum Improve Engagement?

Rationale: As we have moved through the 2020-2021 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic, having to reinvent education because of online platforms, it has become more important than ever to find new ways of engaging our students. In addition, the civil unrest in the summer of 2020 proved that there was more that could be done to reach our students of color, who are underrepresented in our curricula. This has become a prevalent and ongoing concern in our schools, as students are learning on online platforms or in person in a socially distanced classroom.

In Rio Rancho Public Schools, we use Pearson ReadyGen for English/Language Arts, Great Minds Eureka for Math, and HMH for Science. We integrate our Social Studies into our reading curriculum. As teachers look through the curricula, while we may see characters who represent our students of color, we see a vast majority of curriculum materials underrepresenting our students of color. Other curricula fare no better.

Our curriculum should represent all of the students we teach, with characters and people that represent students and authors that inspire all students. In hopes of proving the necessity of representative curriculum, I set out to study the ways student engagement would increase as representative curriculum was used.

Literature Review: Many of the articles that I used focused on the need for students of color to see themselves in what they are taught. I used resources based off of a study done in New York City on literature representation and from Rethinking Schools to inform my ideas. The study done in New York City had three findings: that White authors are massively over-represented in the literature used in ELA curricula studied while authors of color are nearly absent, that the authors of the curricula (and not just the literature) were mostly White, and that while the covers of literature used featured many characters of color, the characters represented in all literature studied were majority White, even while there was a greater representation of Black, Latinx, and Asian characters. (Hester, 2018)

Rethinking Schools collected articles written with the express purpose of teaching students of color. A major theme throughout the articles I read was supporting students through ethnic studies, literature written by authors of color, people of color developing curriculum, and emphasizing achievements of people of color. (Watson, Hagopian, Au; 2018) In many of their

collected articles, anti-racist curriculum was paramount. In her article, Rita Tenorio states that “We wanted our multicultural, multilingual students to not only learn about the history and culture of major ethnic groups, but also to understand racism’s influence on all of us.” (Tenorio, 2004, 2007)

To study the effects of representation in curriculum and how it affects engagement, I created a questionnaire for parents. For students, I want to find out what stories and materials engage students the most. In my questions, I will observe student engagement to see which characters they would like to read about more, and I will ask parents about student reactions to materials. I will do this after multiple read alouds with diverse characters. I will study the curriculum we currently use.

Study Design: I created a survey for parents to assess the read alouds of both the curriculum and the extra read alouds we used during our morning meeting. I sent that survey out to each parent in my homeroom class. This year, I was a virtual teacher for the entire year until April 5, and our parents had access to not only our curriculum read alouds, but also each read aloud that was used during our morning meeting. Originally, I included questions regarding student engagement in the survey, based upon what I would observe in the classroom to gauge student engagement. I ultimately took some of those questions out, but kept others that were more accessible for parents (Appendix A). Finally, when a small amount of students returned to the classroom on April 5, I observed engagement in my students during our read alouds.

Data Analysis: I created an 8 question survey for parents to complete. I wanted to learn the importance parents placed on a representative curriculum. I focused on read alouds because parents had access to each book we read throughout the year, whereas supplemental materials in other academic areas would not be as visible or accessible in a virtual setting. I asked about the students’ favorite read aloud book, what parents noticed while the student was listening to the story, whether a student had follow up questions, and any future recommendations.

I had 3 parents respond to the survey. While I do not believe that this is a big enough sample size, I will summarize the survey responses and my classroom observations here.

How important is it that your student sees themselves represented in the books we read in class? This was a scaled score response from 1-5. All respondents answered with a 4 or a 5. Parents all felt that their child should see themselves represented in the books we read.

Did your student enjoy the read alouds we have listened to this year? 100% of respondents said that their student enjoyed the read alouds we have listened to this year.

What was your student’s favorite read aloud that we have had this year? Each respondent had a different read aloud that was their favorite. *Where is Home, Little Pip?* was a favorite along with *I Love Saturdays y domingos*, and *Apple Pie 4th of July*. *Where is Home, Little Pip?* has a penguin as the main character, while *I Love Saturdays y domingos* had a biracial character that is White and Latina and *Apple Pie 4th of July* is a book about an Asian family on the 4th of July.

Each respondent in this survey is White, according to a demographic survey completed upon their registration to school.

Did you notice a difference in your student's engagement when reading books with characters that they identified with and reading books with characters with whom they did not identify? Out of three respondents, one noticed a difference when their student was listening to books that had characters they identified with, as opposed to two parents who noticed no difference.

Tell me what you noticed when your student was listening to read alouds. Parents observed their students listening to the stories. One parent noted "He seemed more interested in the book." Another stated "My student is pretty engaged overall during read alouds."

Did your student have any questions during the read alouds? Out of the three respondents, 66% said that their students had questions. Unfortunately, one of the questions that I removed was asking for more details about the questions due to the amount of time that had passed since the read alouds were posted.

As a parent, what are the most important things that you think are important in a classroom library? All of the respondents mentioned variety in their answer. They think that variety in level and theme are important, as well as a variety of books that represent many cultures and experiences.

Curriculum Analysis: Currently, our curriculum has 24 different read alouds. Of the 24 read alouds in our ELA curriculum, 63% (15 out of 24) of the books had main characters that were either White or not human. Of the remaining books, 3 of them were informational texts that didn't have main characters but focused instead on musical instruments, clothing, or cityscapes. While they were multicultural by default, their focus was on the inanimate objects rather than the people. In the six remaining books, 4 of them focused on Black families, one focused on a Hispanic family, and one focused on an Asian family.

Classroom Observations: I read the book *She Persisted* to my in person students as they returned to school. There are ten students in the classroom. As I read, students were quiet, attentive, facing the direction of the book, looking at the pictures as I read. Students asked questions about each different person in the book. Students wanted more background knowledge than the book provided, and they made connections. There were 13 women in the book, each of a different time period, culture, race, and age. In the class, there are 5 females and 5 males. All students were engaged and actively listening to the story. None of the students needed reminders to stay on task with the book.

The data in this study is inconclusive. While the classroom observation gave me some data, 3 respondents to the survey is not enough to draw valid conclusions from. If there was more time to try and get more respondents, that might validate the conclusions I see in this data. With my limited number of respondents, I see that parents think it is important for students to see themselves in the material we present to them. Parents want their students to be exposed to a variety of materials from multiple different cultures. Parents observe when their students are engaged, and they see differences in student behaviors during read alouds. Finally, our ELA

curriculum, which is the focus of this current study, has deficits when it comes to representing students in their materials.

Recommendations: While I didn't have a great deal of data to draw from, I still have recommendations that I can make using the data I did collect and the literature review information I collected. I will present my findings to my local union to hopefully use it to help bargain for curricular autonomy.

Students perform better when curriculum materials include their voice and likeness. While I focused on the ELA curriculum, and students need to read books by authors of color, with characters of color, and illustrated by people of color, they also need to see scientists, historians, and mathematicians of color. They need to see accomplishments of people with whom they identify. These need to be prominently displayed in the classroom. From my limited data, parents stated that they thought it was important for students to be represented in what they read. From the literature review, we can see that that is important for each academic area.

Rio Rancho School Employee's Union should advocate for curricular autonomy. While the data from this study was inconclusive, this particular recommendation should be something for which we should be advocating. A curriculum is a great tool, especially for new teachers; teachers should also have the autonomy to use the curriculum framework to meet the standards using materials that are representative of their class. This includes using materials written by people of color, about people of color, and developed with people of color in mind. If this is not a position that is not feasible, Rio Rancho School Employee's Union should advocate for supplementary materials to be provided at district expense for use in the classroom. This would support the recommendation that Rio Rancho Public Schools officially adopt the Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards. Rio Rancho Public Schools and Rio Rancho School Employee's Union should work together to make this a priority. It would make Rio Rancho Public Schools a leader in our state in the area of social justice, and it would send a clear message to our constituents that students of color are important and valued members of our community and that we are committed to the success of our students and community.

Supplemental materials that highlight the diversity of our student's cultures and heritage should be provided for teachers in our state in order to support our students of color in their academic endeavors. New Mexico Public Education Department should be more concerned with including materials that have proven to be culturally relevant to the students we teach. We have a duty, when purchasing materials or cultivating materials for our educators to use, to ensure that students will see themselves represented. While my data is inconclusive in many areas, and my sample size is small, 100% of respondents felt it was important for their students to see themselves represented in the curriculum. This was studied only in ELA materials at this level; I would recommend that NMPED take any opportunity to study this in math and science as well and at all grade levels. NMPED should also adopt the Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards, and lead the nation in showing our students of color that they are valued.

Finally, this study should be expanded. The only way to create change nationally is to study this topic nationally. We need to expand the study to survey parents, students, and teachers nationally at all grade levels and in all academic subjects. If we want a true picture of how students learn and whether or not representation motivates and engages them, we need to ask them on a grander scale. This would lead to better data and the ability to hold companies creating curricula to a higher standard.

In summary, we have a responsibility to our students to ensure that the materials we use value, respect, and celebrate them. Teachers should have the resources provided to them to do so.

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Appendix A

<https://forms.gle/LYM8xGrx5JXMUqPU6>

How important is it that your student sees themselves represented in the books we read in class?

Did your student enjoy the read alouds we have listened to this year?

What was your student's favorite read aloud that we have had this year?

Did you notice a difference in your student's engagement when reading books with characters that they identified with and reading books with characters with whom they did not identify?

Tell me what you noticed when your student was listening to read alouds.

Did your student have any questions during the read alouds?

As a parent, what are the most important things that you think are important in a classroom library?

Which read alouds or book series would you like to see read for the rest of the year?

Appendix B

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/TT-Social-Justice-Standards-Anti-bias-framework-2020.pdf>