

Critically Analyzing Books for Representation

By Jillian Heise and Julia E. Torres

Watch ELA teachers and school librarians Jillian Heise and Julia E. Torres discuss best practices for using a critical lens to find inclusive books – for classroom and school libraries or read-alouds – that can address social and emotional learning (SEL) for all students in their webinar, *Using Inclusive Books to Build Community* (<https://follettk12.link/otk>). This worksheet is based on the webinar and will help guide your inclusive book selections.

Questions to Consider:

Who wrote this book? How do they identify? Are they writing from a place of personal expertise or lived experiences?

- The “Big 8” socially constructed identities are race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religion/spirituality, nationality and socioeconomic status.
- Dominant and subordinate identities can affect an individual’s experience of privilege and oppression. A person’s identity is how the person defines who they are.¹

How are the characters described or illustrated? Are they portrayed with common stereotypes or as fully unique individuals?

- A list of common stereotypes can be found at Social Justice Books (<https://follettk12.link/rhn>).
- “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.”²

Look more closely at how the characters are portrayed in comparison to:

- How Black, Indigenous, People of Color characters are portrayed in comparison to white characters
- How disabled characters are portrayed in comparison to other characters
- How LGBTQIA+ characters are portrayed in comparison to straight characters
- How characters of non-Christian religions are portrayed in comparison to Christian characters
- How characters from outside the US are portrayed in comparison to characters from the US

What do you notice about race/racism? Which identities are seen in central roles (as opposed to side characters or tokenized)?

- “Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows into reality, not just on imaginary worlds. They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in...In this country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems...If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world.”³

Are there diverse voices and perspectives represented? Whose voice is missing or marginalized? How might that impact how the story is received by those whose voices are present and those whose voices are not?

Who has power in the story? Who is empowered in this story?

Is the story celebratory or oppressive to characters from communities that have been marginalized historically? Are the characters from those communities the heroes or the victims/villains?

Look at the copyright date. How long ago was it written? Is it still relevant now?

- Even if it is representative of a historical time period, are there loaded words or perspectives that could perpetuate stereotypes?

Is this a book that will serve to show students they are accepted in their full humanity, affirm their lived experiences and support ALL of their identities? Or will it serve to perpetuate bias, stereotypes and negative viewpoints?

Resources to Learn More and Support Your Efforts

- Webinar – Using Inclusive Books to Build Community Webinar ([follett12.link/mft](https://follett.com/12/link/mft))
- Diverse and Inclusive Book Lists from Follett ([follett12.link/e58](https://follett.com/12/link/e58))
- Classroom Library Questionnaire ([follett12.link/uro](https://follett.com/12/link/uro))
- 10 Quick Ways ([follett12.link/0hg](https://follett.com/12/link/0hg))
- Reading Diversity Lite ([follett12.link/arv](https://follett.com/12/link/arv))
- Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children’s Books ([follett12.link/rhn](https://follett.com/12/link/rhn))
- Social Justice Books ([follett12.link/6rj](https://follett.com/12/link/6rj))
- Summer Reading ([follett12.link/032](https://follett.com/12/link/032))

1. Allen, E. L., Hubain, B., Hunt, C., Lucero, S., & Stewart, S., “Race matters: Implementing racial identity development theories into the classroom,” 11th Annual Diversity Summit, University of Denver, Denver, CO (2012).

2. R.S. Bishop, “Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” Perspectives 6, no.3 (1990): x-xi.

3. R.S. Bishop, “Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” Perspectives 6, no.3 (1990): x-xi.