

Bias in Instructional Materials

Bias in instructional materials can take many forms.¹ When preparing lessons, it's essential to review your instructional materials for different forms of bias and adjust them as needed. The following list includes important terms relevant to bias in instructional materials, and may be useful to participants.

Invisibility

The most fundamental and oldest form of bias in instructional materials is the complete or relative exclusion of a group. The significant omission of marginalized groups has become so great as to imply that these groups are of less value, importance, and significance in our society.

Stereotyping

By assigning traditional and rigid roles or attributes to a group, instructional materials stereotype and limit the abilities and potential of that group. Stereotyping denies students a knowledge of the diversity, complexity and variation of any group of individuals. Children who see themselves portrayed only in stereotypical ways may internalize those stereotypes and fail to develop their own unique abilities, interests, and full potential.

Imbalance and Selectivity

Textbooks can perpetuate bias by presenting only one interpretation of an issue, situation, or group of people. This imbalanced account restricts the knowledge of students regarding the varied perspectives that may apply to a particular situation. Through selective presentation of materials, textbooks can distort reality and ignore complex and differing viewpoints. As a result, millions of students have been given limited perspectives concerning the contributions, struggles and participation of certain groups in society.

Unreality

Textbooks can present an unrealistic portrayal of our history and our contemporary life experience. Controversial topics are sometimes glossed over and discussions of discrimination and prejudice are sometimes avoided. This unrealistic coverage denies children the information they need to recognize, understand, and perhaps someday conquer the problems that plague our society.

Fragmentation and Isolation

By separating issues related to marginalized groups from the main body of the text, instructional materials imply that these issues are less important than and not a part of the cultural mainstream. 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.

¹ This document is adapted from the *Seven Forms of Instructional Bias* developed by the Myra Sadker Foundation and linked [here](#).

Linguistic Bias

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.

Cosmetic Bias

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. For example, 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 exclusion of multi-cultural composers lurking behind the cover.

Gatekeeping²

Research indicates that all students can succeed when they have access to high-quality instruction and are given support to master a challenging curriculum. The reality, for too many students in disadvantaged groups, has been a "dumbing down" of curriculum predicated on the mistaken belief they were not capable of meeting the challenges. Be wary of learning sequences that require "mastering the basics" before cognitively challenging work is offered. This kind of gatekeeping leads to practices such as tracking or relegating disadvantaged groups of students to remedial or low-level classes where they fall further behind their peers who have access to grade-level work. Curriculum materials should support teachers to build from what students know, rather than approach instruction as an opportunity to fix deficits.

²Adapted from "Closing the Opportunity Gap in Mathematics Education: A Position of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics" which can be accessed [here](#).