



Forms of Bias in Instructional Materials

CASE Collaborative Reference Material
2023-2024

Background Information

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.

(All slide text from, Sadker, David. The Myra Sadker Foundation, 1997).

Investigative Strategies to Identify Curriculum Bias

Help students to understand that all media and text is constructed generally with a distinct perspective or message. It's important for students to be cognizant of bias in school texts. Actively engaging students in bias detection can be an empowering experience. 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.

While curriculum bias clearly impacts females and students of color, males are also victims of bias. Using the 7 forms of bias as a framework, find examples that negatively impact 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."

#1 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.

#2 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. For example:

Men portrayed as assertive and successful in their jobs, but rarely discussed as husbands or fathers and women often as caregivers.

#3 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. Examples include:

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.

#4 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.

#5 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.

#6 Linguistic Bias: Words Count

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

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.

(Bethke, 1985)

#7 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. Examples include:

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, multi-ethnic cover that projects a world of diverse songs and symphonies belies the traditional white male composers lurking behind the cover. (Sadker/Lerner, 1997)