



## Visibility as Validation: A Case Study of Culturally Responsive Materials Development for TESOL

In normative multilingual ESL/EFL contexts like India, non-dominant cultural and ethnic representations are absent or superficially represented in English textbooks. For learners from linguistically disadvantaged groups, English has to be negotiated through an unfamiliar dominant language. In this article, I argue that appropriate inclusivity self-checks at the pre-development stage of materials preparation can contribute effectively to the development of culturally responsive English language teaching materials. Using the Steinhardt NYU Metro Center's Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard and the Fairness, Bias, and Cultural-Responsiveness Checklist of the Centre for Collaborative Education, Indiana University, I examine whether, and to what extent, a set of state-mandated English textbooks reflect culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy as a response to the English language needs of multilingual, multicultural learners in India. The study shows that by using appropriate self-check rubrics, textbook developers can identify sites of diversity-blindness or lack of cultural responsiveness, and design materials with inclusive cultural representations.

**Keywords:** multilingual learners, linguistically disadvantaged, English textbook, diversity blindness, culturally responsive materials

### Introduction: Textbooks and Hegemonic Representations

The power and politics implicit in ELT pedagogy and materials for K–12 level has long been a subject of critique, especially since access to English in education by non-first language speakers is still controlled by the hegemony and hierarchies perpetuated by “native speaker” or “Inner Circle” contexts (Gray, 2013, 2016; Grant & Wong, 2018; Kachru, 1985; Karakus, 2021; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Motha, 2014; Phillipson, 1992, 2006; Thomas, 2017). The development of “appropriate” textbooks to teach English at grade school to students from different home language backgrounds in contexts like India is a complex exercise, since ownership of the language itself comes with a loaded colonial and cultural baggage. Similar challenges with textbook development obtain even in the Global North for different reasons, especially in racially diverse contexts such as California that have large immigrant populations. Refugee background students, in particular, bring in a variety of ethnic, racial, linguistic and literacy backgrounds to the classroom, or limited and interrupted formal education experiences arising out of forced or voluntary migration (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2017). But as Thomas (2017, p. 2) argued they are faced with an educational experience that canonizes “particular epistemologies as ‘valid’ knowledge that [they] are taught and examined in during the most vulnerable and malleable years of their lives.”

Such contextual realities led scholars like Thornbury (2013) to claim that commercially produced (language) textbooks are “fundamentally flawed” or even “detrimental” to language teaching, “hindering rather than helping the business of language learning.” (p. 205). Gray (2013) argued that commercially produced materials such as textbooks, “in addition to being curriculum artefacts, are also cultural artefacts which serve to make languages mean in a particular way” (p. 2). Grant and Wong (2018) warned

how “ELT curriculum, textbooks, and supporting materials represent those cultural authorities, norms, and values that the United States and other countries where English is spoken as a first language, accept and acknowledge” (p. 1). In a later article, Gray critiqued this “enduring centrality” of textbooks “as purveyors of thematic content, syllabus and curriculum (particularly in the case of state school education, where specific values may have to be imparted) and as realizations of method and sources of examination preparation and practice” (Gray, 2016, p. 1). The Indian Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), in a report on the Free and Compulsory Education Bill (2005) reminded us that primary school level textbooks “are not just teaching manuals, they shape the minds of children in their formative years, and have a profound influence on how young minds interpret reality” (Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), 2005, p. 7). This has serious implications for both language and cultural development, since “textbooks are often the first point of contact for . . . children to the outside world” (Naseem et al., 2016, p. 7). The authors also argued:

Few, if any, educational and pedagogical materials shape and condition the worldviews, personalities, and identities of young pupil citizens than the textbooks used in schools and beyond . . . They are used as instruments of nation-building, ideological control, and at times for outright indoctrination depending on the national, social, and cultural contexts. Textbooks in themselves are shaped in the intersections of national/global demands of the capital (economy) and the dynamic demands of social cohesion and nation building (Naseem et al., 2016, p. 7).

Traditionally, textbooks have tended to “suppress minority identities and reproduce inequalities that exist in society” by becoming political tools in terms of “who gets to define whom, when, and how. Who has control over the production of pictures and images in this society?” (McCarthy, 1990, p. 122). Even when textbooks have tried to posit contemporary perspectives and representations of historically marginalized groups, they have been guilty of tokenism and stereotyping. McCarthy (1990), for instance, discussed feminist historian Gerder Lerner (1975) who warns of the “compensatory/” or “contribution” (McCarthy, 1990, p. 122) rhetoric through which histories of women’s experiences of women in the United States are presented, since such histories are at best partial representations, and delegitimize the agency of women from working-class or minoritized backgrounds.

The centrality of textbooks in the shaping of a generation’s worldview gains more significance and traction given that the knowledge presented in textbooks is filtered through a social and collective common sense—what Hohne (2003, p. 45) referred to as “social consensus.” The construction of what constitutes common sense, however, may be born of entrenched systems of discursive knowledge made popular and beyond reproach by being representative of a dominant group’s cultural practices. This knowledge then gets legitimized and has a normalizing effect. Even attempts by (national or regional) education policy and curriculum frameworks to reflect inclusion and diversity through representation of non-dominant groups in textbooks are hardly neutral, since representations are very often “manifestations of power that one group has to ‘name’, to interpellate another person or group” (Naseem et al., 2016, p. 8). Textbook discourse, which Thomas (2017) referred to as “material incarnations of a hegemonic discourse” (p. 1) is thus permeated with an underlying vein of otherness, a subtle distinction between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ that, by virtue of being visible in content, gets transformed into a normalized, naturalized and ‘correct’ worldview. As Kubota (2001) argued, textbooks and other teaching materials promote the dominant culture by reproducing the power relations and value systems that represent the culture of the dominant group(s). When curricula are conceived, legislated and executed by a dominant group, the voices of less powerful groups are rendered “absent, silent, and thus inconsequential” (Naseem, Arshad-Ayaz & Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2016, p. 8).

However, textbooks can also become a powerful medium for developing critical and anti-racist perspectives and worldviews, and re-centering the invisible. For example, by developing a sense of subjectivity and self-identity (DeJaeghere & Tudball, 2007; Thomas, 2017), students from minority racial groups can be taught to respond to dominant Western text content through non-dominant cultural

assumptions and positions. But more importantly, using appropriate self-check rubrics, textbook developers can identify sites of diversity-blindness or lack of cultural responsiveness, and design materials with inclusive cultural and racial representations. For instance, normative illustrations and images (such as stereotypical male/female professions) could be replaced by people or images under-represented groups; dialogues could incorporate dialectal variations or even 'non-standard' linguistic forms that are in common use in the real world, and historical commentaries could reflect minority community perspectives. Through inclusion of non-dominant groups not just in content or visual presentations but also in discussions and comprehension check activities, tokenisms or stereotyping in representation can be avoided. As the testimonials from participants of this study will illustrate, the attention of textbook developers needs to be consciously drawn to the omission or marginalization of minoritized groups and perspectives, especially if textbooks are developed by members of dominant ethnic and cultural groups.

### **Textbook Development and English Language Education in the Indian Context**

In normative multilingual ESL/EFL contexts like India, textbooks are the main bridge to both content and proficiency development in English. English is the “associate official language” of India and the language of administration and higher education, and hence is taught as a compulsory subject at primary (grade) school. However, access to English is uneven and complex, especially for semi-urban and rural populations, mainly because English is not a visible language in many children’s immediate environment, especially children from lower socioeconomic groups. In such contexts, English instruction is constructed in textbooks through symbols, artifacts, and cultural representation of privileged groups in ways that do not speak to the lives of minoritized communities. These ‘privileged groups’ are mostly majority ethnic and linguistic communities whose home language is usually the language of education and administration. Some others are dominant religious communities or castes, or groups that influence political rhetoric or ideology through higher socioeconomic status. Privilege thus accrues from the intersection of linguistic dominance with economic status, religion or social class, all of which get reflected in access to English and visibility in material texts.

Even in private (fee-paying) schools, which are mostly schools with English as a medium of instruction, English is not the first language of more than 99 percent of children.<sup>1</sup> Within this private English-medium school sector, the cost of schooling varies widely (see Mohanty 2017), creating distinct class divisions between those who can afford elite high-fee schools, and those who enroll their children in mid- or low-cost schools according to their socioeconomic status. Children who can afford ‘better’ private schools read English textbooks produced by global ELT publishing houses, while students in most low-cost private schools study locally produced textbooks. The pedagogy focus of English textbooks also vary according to the kind of school that prescribes them; for example, commercially produced textbooks are likely to have a ‘communicative’ focus with lessons built around ‘language functions’ in hotels and airports, or excerpts from ‘classic’ English (i.e., British or American) literature. The intersection of social and economic class, in short, bears heavily upon the kinds of narratives children are fed in textbooks.

For a majority of children in early grades in India, consequently, the first encounter with English is through the textbook, and not the environment in which their cognitive, ideological and emotional development occurs. This merits serious contemplation, especially in terms of the ideologies that get enshrined in textbooks as sacrosanct, and therefore, impermeable. The CABE report warned of the risks of “reinforcing traditional power hierarchies” through textbooks, because:

[n]arrow polemics leave unexplored whole areas of composite culture, syncretism and ideas . . . [Textbooks] should enable students both to recognize how inequalities of caste and class persist in our society, and to challenge these. . . . The absence of reference to the child’s immediate environment makes curricular material appear alien . . . (CABE, 2005, pp. vi–vii)

---

<sup>1</sup>According to the 2011 Census (the 2021 census report is not yet available), English is the first language/mother tongue of 256,000 people (0.02% of the population).

The Draft New Education Policy (NEP) (2019) also notes the “biased picture of life” reflected in textbooks,

where the view of the “powerful” prevails: for example, the earning member of a family is almost always male in our textbooks; names of children in stories might not reflect all communities; there are almost no references to people that are differently-abled. Thus many of our classroom processes do not welcome or encourage children from disadvantaged or underrepresented communities (p. 138)

National education policy thus acknowledges the damage, through hegemonic textbook production, to the ideals of equity, inclusion and diversity that undergird culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Culturally responsive education (CRE) (Gay, 2000, 2002, 2010; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b) which is actualized through culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, refers to “the combination of teaching, pedagogy, curriculum, theories, attitudes, practices, and instructional materials that center students’ culture, identities, and contexts throughout educational systems” (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019, p. 4). Textbooks are a key component of culturally responsive teaching, “as they are filled with stories, activities, assignments, and illustrations that influence how young people understand the world, and contribute to centering and normalizing people, cultures, and values” (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019, p. 4).

### **Textbook Development for Primary Grade English: The Context of the Study**

This study examines a series of English textbooks prepared for upper primary state government schools in Assam, India, to see how far they responded to culturally responsive policy guidelines and dispensations. In India, state school textbooks for K–8 are developed by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) through an exercise that involves SCERT education officers and lecturers of the Council and its district level bodies, and a select group of government school teachers. The process of textbook development is highly bureaucratic, where the Council requisitions consultant “experts” from other educational institutions such as universities as advisors, which, as a senior university academic, was my role in this project. I was expected to oversee content selection, writing and editing of the Sunbeam English Reader series for Classes 6 to 8 (average age 11 to 13 years). I approached the project from a CRE and social justice perspective, and through a critical discourse lens that views language production as social practice. My decision was guided by an article by Kidwai et al. (2013) on a SCERT-Assam textbook review, which had concluded that “the local textbooks and the teaching-learning methods were ‘not suitable for children of all sections of society’, ‘not local specific’, ‘not related to day-to-day life’ of the students and teachers, and ‘not helpful in elevating the poor class in the long run’ (SCERT-Assam, 2010, p.7)” (Kidwai et al., 2013, p. 18).

My ideological standpoint on this project was also informed by my own experience of using English textbooks with preservice teachers in practice teaching sessions at local schools, where we saw how the lack of room for critical intervention and validation of ‘other’ ways of living and thinking in textbooks could cause a ripple effect on pedagogy and examinations, as well as on children’s socialization processes. When curricula are conceived, legislated, and executed by dominant groups through top down and hierarchical exercises, the exclusionary curricula framing, which is enacted through textbook content, gives a message to many communities that what is familiar, valuable, or relatable to them is neither necessary nor important.

I formulated the following overarching question to guide my review of the Sunbeam English Readers: *Do the SCERT English textbooks for Upper Primary level include more than token representations of minority communities, cultures and voices, and reflect diversity of subject matter, style, and social and cultural views?*

The question was prompted by two considerations, the first arising out of a perception on textbook production, and the second out of the stated aims of the Sunbeam textbooks. The perception related to gay Indonesian poet Norman Pasaribu's comment, "When you don't see yourself on the page, it's harder to imagine yourself as a person" quoted by John Gray (2019, 33:28) in a plenary talk at the Annual IATEFL<sup>2</sup> Conference, which led me to ask: Do the textbooks ensure that all children see themselves on the page? The second point that prompted my study was triggered by the CRE perspective taken by the Sunbeam Readers and formulated in the Foreword, which states that each textbook contains lessons and activities that:

- Include stories or incidents about people from various ethnic, language, religious and cultural backgrounds;
- Relate to children with special needs (CWSN) (these are meant to develop in your learners empathy and understanding towards people who are different from them); and
- Help . . . learners learn inclusivity and acceptance, so that they can become caring, tolerant and responsible citizens of the country. (p. vi)

To analyze the textbook content, I adapted two standardized instruments developed by New York University and the Centre for Collaborative Education (CCE), Indiana, USA that use a scorecard and checklists respectively to determine the cultural responsiveness of teaching materials and assessments.

### **Theoretical Frameworks for Cultural Equity and Responsiveness**

The following two instruments were adapted for my study to measure cultural equity and representation:

- The Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (CRCS) (2018) developed by Bryan-Gooden, Hester and Peoples for the Metropolitan Centre for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University (NYU Metro Center); and
- The Fairness, Bias, and Cultural-Responsiveness (FBCR) Checklist (Quality Performance Assessment) (2017) developed by the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), Indiana Department of Education.

I also had conversations with the seven members of the textbook development team during the editing process, after we had identified sites of discrimination or under-representation, to understand whether, and how, their perspectives had altered through their encounter with the instrument rubrics. The NYU Metro Center's CRC Scorecard was originally designed "to help parents, teachers, students, and community members determine the extent to which their schools' English Language Arts curricula are (or are not) culturally responsive" (p. 4). The scorecard is designed as a comprehensive tool drawing upon a wide range of rubrics (multicultural, anti-bias, textbook and cultural standards) to "provoke thinking about how students should learn, what they should learn, and how curriculum can be transformed to engage students effectively" (p. 4).

The CRCS considers cultural responsiveness through three broad measures: Representation, Social Justice and Teacher's Materials. Representation is determined by tallying diversity of authors, diversity of characters and the accurate portrayals of their cultural history and experiences without stereotyping. The Social Justice aspect is examined through relationships, centering and affirming the worldviews of underrepresented groups in an effort to decolonize power and privilege. This category tries to determine if the content of the materials represents students' experiences of their daily lives, communities and cultures, and also help them examine their own perspectives and privileges to develop critical consciousness of systems of oppression. Examination of the teacher's materials includes scrutinizing teacher manuals and guides to determine if the curriculum provides teachers with "guidance on how to approach, enhance, and customize lessons for their student populations" (p. 7).

---

<sup>2</sup>International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

The criteria of the scorecard rubric are organized into scores ranging from 'Very Satisfied (+2)' to 'Not Satisfied (-2),' depending on the extent to which the materials contain evidence, through "specific examples (stories, passages, illustrations, quotes, assignments, etc.)" (p. 8) of culturally responsive content. The descriptors of representation are also arranged into progressive levels of responsiveness: Culturally Destructive, Culturally Insufficient, Emerging Awareness, Culturally Aware and Culturally Responsive according to whether the materials reinforce stereotypes or capture a wide range of representations.

The CCE's Fairness, Bias, and Cultural-Responsiveness Checklist for Quality Performance Assessment (FBCR) instrument seeks to "ensure assessments have technical quality, focusing in on fairness, bias, and cultural-responsiveness" (p. 1). The scorecard constructs bias as "the presence of some characteristic of a performance task that results in differential performance for two individuals of the same skill and achievement level but from different racial, ethnic, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability, religion, or regional backgrounds." The scorecard seeks to ensure that "no student should be disadvantaged by performance task content that is insensitive or disrespectful to the student's race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability, religion, or regional background" (p. 1). Five categories are investigated by the scorecard, with an overarching question for each question, which is sub-divided into more specific probing questions:

- *Might any element of the task content or language unfairly disadvantage a subgroup?* (Bias)
- *Are there any elements of the task that could be considered to reflect a stereotypical view of, or offensive to, a subgroup?* (Stereotyping)
- *Are the lessons fair for all students regardless of subgroup?* (Fairness)
- *Is adequate attention paid to cultural responsiveness of the performance task?* (Cultural Responsiveness)
- *Is adequate attention paid to ensuring proper scaffolding of controversial topics prior to completing the performance task?* (Controversial Topics)

### **Mapping Cultural Responsiveness in English Textbooks**

For my study, I looked for instances of representation of character portrayals from non-dominant ethnic groups, as well as of women characters and children with special needs (CWSN). I developed a set of specific questions as CRE markers to investigate racial bias, under-representation and cultural stereotyping:

- Do the textbooks represent minority communities, cultures and voices in a fashion which respects their dignity as human beings and accurately mirrors their contributions to Indian/Assamese culture, history, and letters?
- Are the illustrations or descriptions of the non-dominant community non-stereotyped and accurately portray historical and socioeconomic diversity?
- Do the illustrations of non-dominant communities, cultures and voices show them in a variety of roles, including positions of authority?
- Are the dialogues of non-dominant characters in the textbooks realistic (not exclusively stereotyped)?
- Do the discussions of Indian or Assamese literary, social and political history mention contributions by members of non-dominant communities, cultures and voices?
- Are the discussions of Indian or Assamese literary, social and political history conducted by members of non-dominant communities, cultures and voices?

Applying the CRC scorecard and the FBCR checklist to the texts and comprehension check exercises of the textbooks for the three grades helped me identify several sites that needed to be reframed for equitable representation of cultural responsiveness. The main findings are discussed below.

## Sample Representation

Table 1 below captures instances of representation in the textbooks through six criteria:

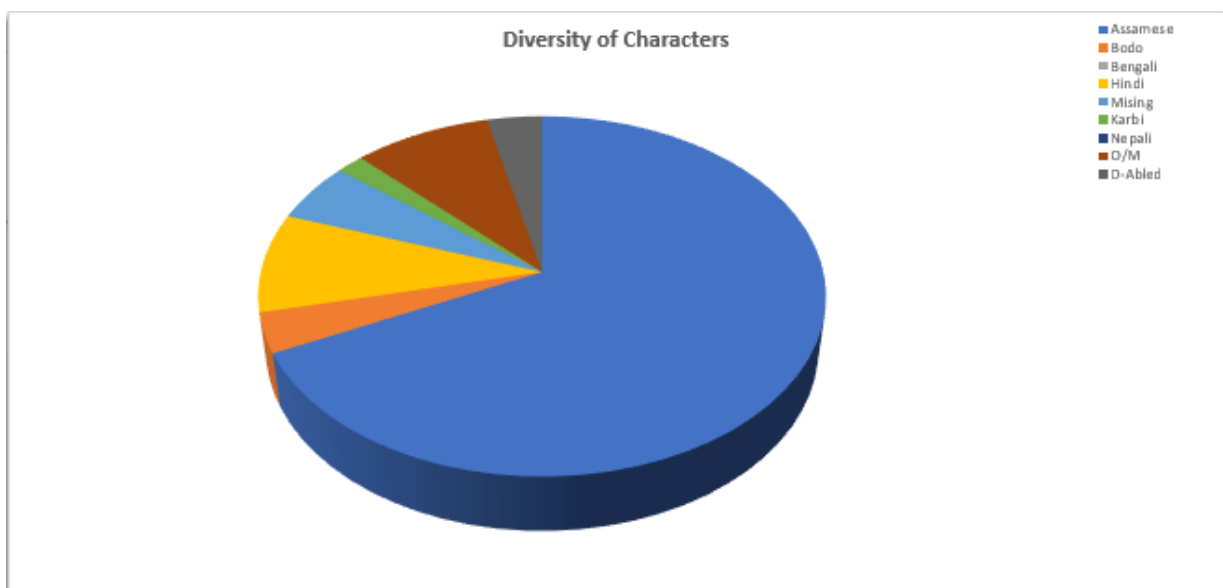
**Table 1**  
*Sample Representations of Cultural Responsiveness*

Class	No. of lessons with representation of non-dominant groups	Ratio of male: female characters	No. of CWSN activities (i.e., activities that can be performed by children with special needs)	No. of lessons where female characters are mainstream	No. of lessons where minority groups are mainstream	No. of lessons with critical engagement with cultural responsiveness
VI	4 out of 8	27: 16	2	2 out of 8	2 out of 8	2 out of 8
VII	3 out of 8	23: 19	1	2 out of 8	3 out of 8	3 out of 8
VIII	5 out of 8	22: 21	2	2 out of 8	3 out of 8	3 out of 8

Out of the 24 lessons in the three textbooks surveyed, about 50% had references to members and cultures of non-dominant groups through the use of character names from minority ethnic groups and discussions of festivals and cultural conventions of non-dominant groups. About one-third (33%) of the lessons mainstreamed content that connected with the lives and cultures of minority groups. Only 25% of the lessons had female characters in mainstream roles. There were no instances of any references to other genders, or other marginalized groups such as CWSN. Furthermore, only about 33% of the lessons had content that offered an opportunity to students for critical engagement with culture and cultural responsiveness.

The pie chart below shows the diversity of characters according to ethnic groups. Only about 30% representation of eight minority groups was found as against 70% of characters and character depictions from the mainstream Assamese community and culture.

**Figure 1**  
*Diversity of Characters*

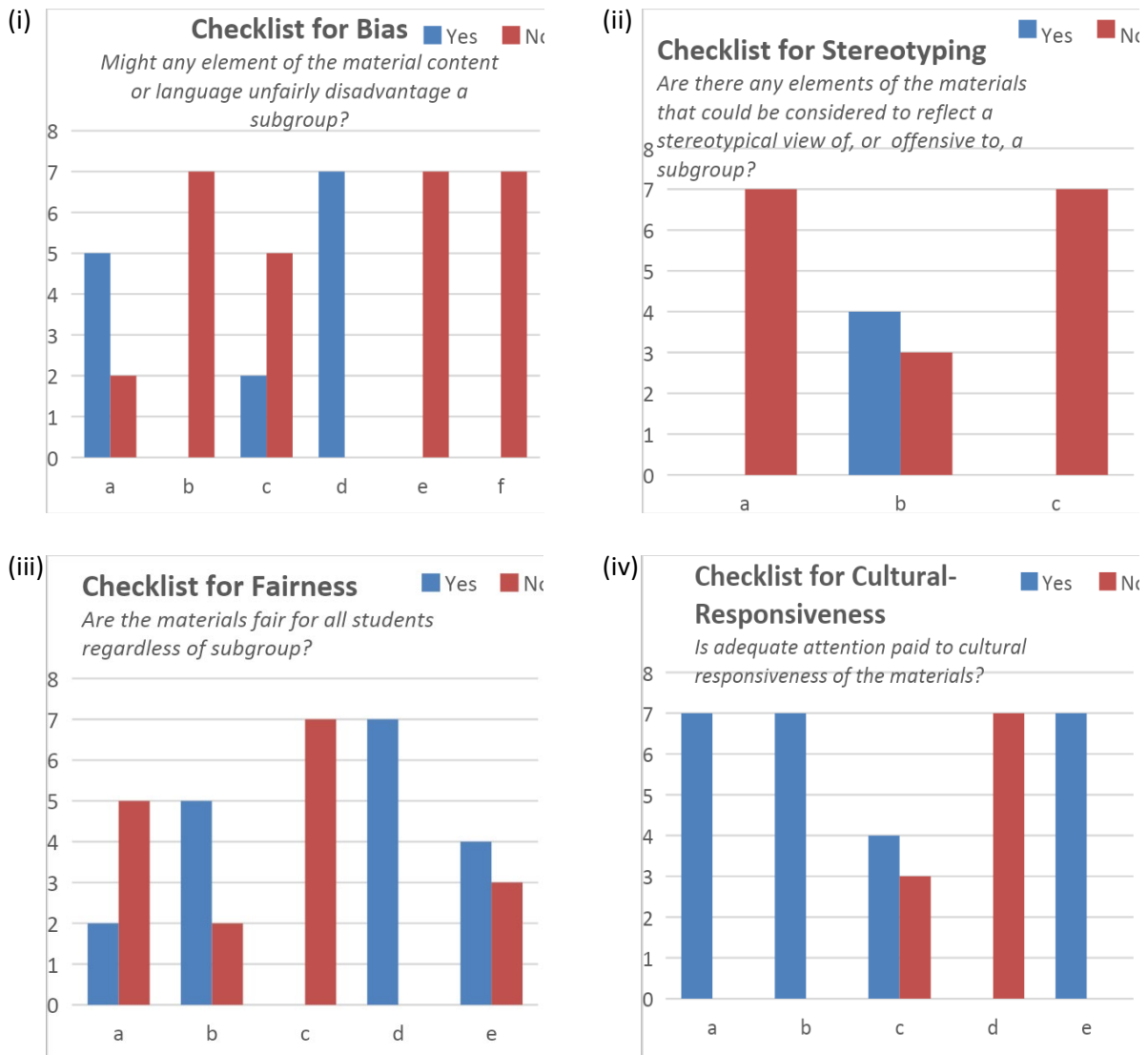


### **Stereotyping, Bias and Traditional Roles**

Apart from representation, the materials were also reviewed for overt and implicit presentation of bias, stereotyping, unfairness and cultural hegemony. Although not many sites of cultural unresponsiveness were identified, the lessons had scope for more positive interventions, as the bar charts in Figure 2 (i)–(iv) demonstrate. For instance, although the content was not overtly offensive to any sub-group, there were many instances of stereotyping, such as images and text portraying traditional and patriarchal roles of men and women in various professions.

**Figure 2(i)–(iv)**

*Bar Chart for Bias, Stereotyping, Fairness & Cultural Responsiveness*



### **The Relevance of the Exercise**

Putting the materials to a cultural responsiveness test proved beneficial for the project, as it helped the textbook developers and reviewers identify sites of diversity blindness, stereotyping, perpetuation of dominant culture ideologies and symbols and cultural unresponsiveness at the editing stage. It also helped the state government’s textbook development agency meet UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015–30 (#4, 5 & 16). Additionally, it provided both the SCERT and the team with a set of robust tools for the next round of textbook production.

Below are a set of visuals from the textbooks that illustrate a few areas where the content was modified for cultural responsiveness:

**Figure 3(i)–(ii)**  
Class 6, Lesson 3

(i) Which sport do you like the most? Here are some sentences on Sachin Tendulkar, the world famous cricketer.

(a) My favourite player is Sachin Tendulkar.  
 (b) He plays cricket.  
 (c) He played for the Indian cricket team.  
 (d) He is a magnificent batsman.  
 (e) He was awarded the Bharat Ratna by the Indian government.

Now write the name of your favourite player in the circle as shown. Then write five words related to that person. Tell the class a few sentences about the person using the words you have written. You can write your sentences in the space below before sharing them with the class.

(ii) Do you recognise the man in this picture? He is Girish Sharma, a champion para-badminton player. Find out more about Girish Sharma and complete the information on him for your class noticeboard.

Name: Girish Sharma  
 Birth: Rajkot, Rajasthan  
 Major achievement: Gold medal in Paralympics Asia Cup for differently abled people  
 Childhood: .....  
 .....  
 Education: .....  
 .....  
 Other medals won:.....

**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - I* (pp. 39–40) by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2019, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.

The activity in Figure 3(i) from a lesson on sports was originally based on a popular male cricket icon but was later modified to showcase a differently-abled sports person (Figure 3(ii)). This not only rendered the activity more inclusive, but it also helped mainstream marginalized sports such as women’s cricket or badminton, or events such as the Paralympics. A similar modification was made to the image accompanying the poem ‘A House A Home’ in a Class 8 lesson that depicted a traditional ‘joint’ family comprising grandparents, parents and children of a Hindu Assamese community. After the CRCS and FBCR exercise, it was decided that the image could be replaced by something like Figure 3(ii) that would represent not just families from non-dominant ethnic groups, but also from single-parent or gay families. This intervention was considered necessary to teach cultural acceptance.

**Figure 4(i)–(ii)**  
Representation Cultural Assumptions of Family

(i) 12. Recite the poem:

**A House A Home**

What is a house?  
 It's brick and stone  
 and wood that's hard.  
 Some window glass  
 and perhaps a yard.  
 It's eaves and chimneys  
 and tile floors  
 and stucco and roof  
 and lots of doors.

What is a home?  
 It's loving and family  
 and doing for others.  
 It's brothers and sisters  
 and fathers and mothers.  
 It's unselfish acts  
 and kindly sharing  
 and showing your loved ones  
 you're always caring.

— Lorraine M. Halli

(ii) **What is a Family?**

Everybody has a family. Families can be made up of a mother, a father and children. But there are lots of other types of families, as well! For example:

Mum, dad and children  
 Grandparents and grandchildren  
 Dad and children  
 Mum and children  
 Two dads and child  
 Two mums and child

**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - I* (p. 109) by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2020, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.

In another effort at mainstreaming nondominant groups, professions and worldviews, an activity containing images of men in conventional male-dominated professions or work roles was modified to portray women (Figure 5(i) from Lesson 6, Class 7), while the visual of a woman cooking over a stove accompanying the poem 'Curry in a Hurry' (Figure 5(ii) from Lesson 8, Class 6) was replaced by a young man.

**Figure 5(i)–(ii)**  
*Mainstreaming Women in Various Professions*

(i) **Dhunu's Guitar**

What do you want to be when you grow up? The job that we do to earn money when we grow up is called a **profession**. Work with the friend who is sitting next to you. Tell each other about the professions of your father or mother, or both.

Now look at the pictures below – they show people who do different kinds of jobs. How many can you identify? Write the profession under each picture. One has been done for you.

Teacher

(ii)

**Curry in a Hurry!**

If you want to serve plain rice with some curry,  
But don't know what to do because you're in a hurry,  
Don't waste time in worry –  
Rush! Don't tarry.  
Pick some green peas and red cherry tomatoes,  
To tickle the palate with the colours of the mistletoe,  
Use the baby potatoes in their brown jackets,  
Take out the spices from their packets.  
Now toss in the vegetables in heated oil,  
Add the salt, pepper, curd, herbs and some spice,  
Pour in warm water, simmer, let boil,  
In a jiffy, your curry in a hurry will be ready to serve with rice!

**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - II* (p. 66) and *Sunbeam English Reader - I* (p. 109) respectively by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2020, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.

Lesson 4 of Class 8 was an effort at mainstreaming minoritized communities. In this lesson shown in Figure 6 below, the image, the names of characters and other markers, as well as the discussion, were modified to represent a minoritized community's cultural practices.

**Figure 6**  
*Mainstreaming Minority Groups and Ideologies*

Dokchory is a student of Class VIII of Disangmukh Janajati High School. Her Ba-bu (father) Konke Mili takes her to school on his bicycle. She loves the bicycle ride for she gets to know new things every day. 'Dokchory' means a necklace of beads the Misings usually wear in festival time.

**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - III* (p. 49) by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2020, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.


Other efforts at inclusiveness and cultural awareness included building activities that prompted critical discussions around CWSN groups, ethnic minorities and women. The following images from Lessons 8 and 4 of Class 8 (Figure 7(i)–(ii)) were modified to encourage critical engagement around these issues.

### Figure 7(i)

#### Critical Discussion: CEDAW and Discrimination

**Lesson 8**

**Chandraprabha Saikiani**



Do you know what rules society had for women a hundred years ago?  
Work with a friend. List at least five rules women in the early 20th century had to follow, that modern women do not need to.  
What will you do if you are asked to speak with boys from behind a bamboo screen?  
Now read this story about a passionate Assamese woman who tried to remove the taboos faced by herself and other women of her days.

School. Chandraprabha made the best of her school education. On several occasions she fought for the rights of girls. In those days girls weren't admitted into the hostel unless they converted to Christianity. Chandraprabha vehemently opposed this and the school authorities were compelled to allow girls of all religions to avail the hostel facilities.

In 1925, Chandraprabha challenged the prevailing custom of women sitting behind a bamboo screen in public meetings. In the Assam Sahitya Sabha session held that year at Nagaon, she delivered a very powerful speech and demanded the removal of the bamboo screen that was placed between men and women. She was staunchly against such restrictions and her protest against these norms of society was not confined to this incident alone. The next year, at her initiative, the first women's organisation, "Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti" was formed.

Chandraprabha Saikiani was greatly affected by the deep rooted caste system in India. In her own state, Assam, she took matters into her own hands. One of such radical steps was to fight for the entry of every one, irrespective of caste, gender and class, into the famous Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo.

In 1921, when Chandraprabha met Mahatma Gandhi, she was inspired to join the freedom movement. She spread the message of khadi, boycott of foreign clothes, removal of untouchability, banning of opium and other social evils. From 1930 onwards she immersed herself in the freedom movement. She was imprisoned thrice, in 1931, 1942 and in 1943. Nothing could dampen her indomitable patriotic spirit. Whenever she saw any injustice, her rebellious spirit rose to the occasion.

**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - III* (pp. 100–101) by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2020, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.

### Figure 7(ii)

#### An Activity and Discussion Around CWSN Groups

9. (a) Have you heard of CEDAW? The full form of CEDAW is the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. CEDAW is an international treaty adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly. Described as an internal bill of rights for women, CEDAW was ratified by 189 countries. Some of the important features of CEDAW are:
- Governments shall take concrete steps to eliminate discrimination against women.
  - Governments shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that women can enjoy basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.
  - Governments shall take appropriate measures to eliminate sexist stereotypes.
  - Women will have the right of vote, to participate in forming and implementing governmental policies.

Look how things have changed since the days of Chandraprabha Saikiani! Today governments themselves have undertaken the task of eliminating discrimination against women. But the government alone cannot succeed in this task unless women become aware of their rights.

- (i) Work in small groups to find out more about CEDAW on the internet and write down some more important features of CEDAW. (You can search [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).)
- (ii) Based on your reading, prepare a poster on the topic - 'Let's stop discrimination against women'.

**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - III* (pp. 107–108) by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2020, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.

As you read in the lesson, even a child considered ugly by others looks beautiful to its mother. You must have seen, read or heard about differently abled children. There are children who cannot see, hear or talk; there are

89

children with no limbs or ill-formed limbs, and there are children born with conditions such as Autism (having problems with social and communication skills) or Down syndrome (delay in physical and mental growth). These children are called children with special needs (CWSN). Do you think parents will love their child less if it is not born with perfect physical and mental health?

Your teacher will write the following topic on the blackboard for a class debate.

*"All mothers love their children and think their child is the most beautiful."*


**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - II* (pp. 89–90) by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2020, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.

There was also an attempt to engage children in class activities that would help them respond adequately to events around their everyday lives. One such activity (Figure 8) in the Class 8 textbook was built around students developing a plan of action as a flood response—a familiar annual natural calamity.

**Figure 8**  
*Teaching Cultural Responsiveness in Context*

You all know what happens when it rains heavily during the monsoon season and floods come. In groups, note down five problems brought by floods, and five things we should do to save ourselves. Then share your points with the rest of the class.

Here is a story of a flood in a rural area called Chitolla and how people responded to it. After you finish reading, compare your answers with the story. How many things were similar?



**Project work:**  
Imagine your village has been inundated by the flood waters of the Brahmaputra. Discuss in your group what steps you will take as volunteers to provide relief to the flood victims of your village. Draw up a plan of action.

The plan of action may include the following:

- Collecting donations for the flood affected people, including clothes, food and other items of daily use
- Writing to various NGOs for help
- Writing to civil authorities for aid, on behalf of different individual victims and so on
- Giving company to the affected children and the elderly victims
- Providing first aid to the flood affected people

Prepare a notice to be hung on your school noticeboard informing the students about a free health camp to help the flood victims.

**Note.** From *Sunbeam English Reader - III* (p. 9; p. 18) by State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam, 2020, Assam Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. Reprinted with permission.

### **Summary of Scores on the CRC Scorecard**

After these interventions we reviewed the textbooks once again and measured their cultural responsiveness by submitting them to the CRC Scorecard. A computation of the scores in the respective scorecard categories showed that the materials had become culturally responsive to a moderately high degree. For example, the Representation scorecard returned a score of 19.8/26, which made the materials fulfill the criterion for **Culturally Responsive**:

The curriculum likely captures a decent representation of diverse characters, who are generally portrayed in accurate and dynamic ways. There is likely some diversity among the curriculum contributors and illustrators.

The score for Social Justice Orientation was 11.15/16, which again placed the content in the **Culturally Responsive** criterion:

The curriculum likely centers people of color, marginalized populations, and multiple perspectives. The curriculum provides multiple opportunities for students to think critically. There are several opportunities for teachers to connect students' learning to real life issues and action.

For the Teachers' materials, the score of 9.87/18 placed the materials in the **Culturally Aware** category:

There is a lot of guidance on engaging cultural responsiveness. Teachers are presented with activities to reflect on their worldviews and how they see and teach students. There is some guidance on several of the following: supplementing curriculum, engaging students in culturally sensitive experiential learning, and making real life connections between the curriculum and students' lives.

The testimonials from the seven participants of the scoring exercise (besides myself) also helped triangulate the responses and provide an encouraging glimpse of a change of perception:

- *"I think we had done a good amount of representation, until I filled in the scorecards after our first draft . . . I realized we had only done token justice."*
- *"Since the majority of our students are Assamese, I did not see why we need to include so much of other communities."*
- *"I thought a few pictures of disabled children would make our textbooks inclusive. I did not consciously think of making them 'central characters rather than sidekicks' until I saw the statements in the scorecard."*
- *"I think every textbook development team should understand what culturally responsive pedagogy truly means, before preparing teaching materials."*
- *"Not just the choice of lesson, but related activities and teacher notes should also keep reinforcing the need to make minority groups visible."*
- *"I think our teacher education programs need a compulsory course on CRE (Culturally Responsive Education)."*
- *"Being an Assamese speaker, I did not really think of the voices of other communities before this project."*

### **Conclusion: Good Practices in Textbook Development**

The learning from this exercise was not only relevant for a review of textbooks, but it also provided stakeholders with a new orientation towards inclusion, diversity, and under-representation. Since most of the textbook authors belonged to the dominant ethnic and linguistic community (Assamese), the exercise taught the need for more inclusivity not only in textbook content, but also in the choice of textbook developers, so that any inclusionary practice did not remain mere tokenisms, but situated practices supported by policy. The key lessons from this exercise can inform English textbook development not just in ESL/EFL contexts like India, but also in multiracial regions such as California where not all primary school children speak English at home or are familiar with supposedly mainstream White American linguistic and cultural practices.

This was brought home to me particularly when I volunteered, in the fall of 2019, as an after-school tutor at a California high school with a large refugee-background student population. In my

reflective notes I wrote about my frustration at seeing 15-year-old students struggle to complete assignments from an English Language Arts textbook that were premised on idiomatic language very unfamiliar to the student group. These were children with just about four or five years in the U.S., with limited English and from very different learning, socialization, and home culture experiences, working for a high school diploma. They struggled to make sense, in a language that they did not own, of ideas and ideologies that took for granted a natural familiarity with American history and idiom.

Although the textbook tried to promote equity, social justice, diversity, and acceptance (through, for instance, a lesson on Nelson Mandela and a short story by Anita Walker), it quickly became apparent to me that these lessons were written from an “insider-looking-outward” perspective (i.e., speaking to dominant racial communities), rather than as texts that showcased natural and commonplace experiences of non-dominant racial groups. For example, students had to complete a worksheet on Allusions, which drew upon ‘common’ celebrities and referenced many idiomatic ‘everyday’ uses of English. But for these students, who had not heard of any English movie except Lion King or had not grown with typical American food, places, history, holidays or ‘teen lingo,’ there was nothing that could serve as a reference point for discussion. In other words, rather than accommodating worldviews of children from minority racial groups with little or limited schooling and socialization experiences, or students bringing in language, racial, and cultural experiences from a very different orientation, textbooks such as these unwittingly promote and perpetuate dominant racial and cultural perspectives and perceptions.

Given the racial diversity in the U.S., and the deep-rooted racism evidenced in the tragic murder of George Floyd and recent school and workplace killings of minorities, it is imperative that English textbooks at K–12 be used to develop inclusiveness, cultural acceptance, and responsiveness. Events such as the George Floyd murder revive traumatic cultural memories of racial intolerance and negate the impact of culturally responsive educational practices. Teachers working within a social justice and critical consciousness paradigm do use racially and culturally varied texts as tools for critical reflection. However, working with the refugee-background students made me painfully aware that until students develop a familiarity with the language itself, such efforts may not bear much fruit. To make students “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire 2014, p. 81, in Styslinger, 2019, p. 13), the texts that students read would have to reflect the students’ own identities and experiences, through “a web of rigorous content” (Greathouse, et al., 2019, p. 42).

Textbook development would thus need:

- To focus on areas where cultural interventions (ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, perceptual, gendered) could be rendered both inclusive and transformative, moving beyond overt manifestations like festivals, holidays, and (mainstream) family traditions;
- Appropriate inclusivity self-checks at the pre-development stage of materials, which can contribute effectively to the development of culturally responsive anti-racist teaching materials for multicultural contexts; and
- More equitable participation of stakeholders to accommodate more bottom-up, contextualized perspectives, perceptions, knowledge and experience.

In addition to CRE being articulated and actively adopted in teaching materials by textbook development agencies for schools, national education policies would need to adopt CRE rubrics as a systemic intervention. Teacher education initiatives, as testimonials from teachers in this study have attested, will need to be restructured to draw more vigorously from CRE pedagogies, such that both language teacher development and language teaching methodologies build cultural diversity, anti-racist pedagogies, inclusivity and responsiveness as embedded practices. Furthermore, self-check rubrics like the ones used for this study may be incorporated in (English language) teacher education classrooms to encourage pre- and in-service teachers to critically evaluate the textbooks they are told or choose to use and use this as a guide to adapt textbooks in culturally more responsive ways. Through such endeavors,

not only would nations respond more robustly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but they would also help build a new generation of culturally responsive citizens that can contribute responsively to building a just and equitable society.

### Author

*Padmini Bhuyan Boruah is presently Professor & Head of the Department of English Language Teaching at Gauhati University, India. A Fulbright Fellow (2019–20) at the University of San Diego, California, her research includes English Language Education (ELE) policies and pedagogies in multilingual India. Her current work includes two collaborative South Asia projects on ELE, a Routledge (co-authored) book on ELE and Social Inequality, and a chapter on neoliberalism and ELE (Springer). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4380-2567>*

### References

- Bryan-Gooden, J., Hester, M., & Peoples, L. Q. (2019). *Culturally responsive curriculum scorecard*. New York: Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University. <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/ejroc/culturally-responsive-curriculum-scorecards>
- Center for Collaborative Education. (2017). *Fairness, bias and cultural responsiveness checklist*. <https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/Fairness-Bias-and-Cultural-Responsiveness-Checklist.pdf>
- Custodio, B., & O'Loughlin, J. B. (2017). Students with interrupted formal education: Bridging where they are and what they need. Corwin.
- DeJaeghere, J., & Tudball, L. (2007). Looking back, looking forward: critical citizenship as a way ahead for civics and citizenship education in Australia. *Citizenship Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 40–57.
- Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *The Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106–116.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching* (2nd Ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Grant, R., & Wong, S. (2018) Addressing cultural bias in ELT materials. *TESOL Encyclopedia of English language teaching*, 1, 1–8.
- Gray, J. (2016). ELT materials: Claims, critiques and controversies. In G. Hall (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 93–107) Routledge.
- Gray, J. (2019, April 3) *Gender and sexuality in ELT – inclusive education vs. queer pedagogy*. <https://z-m-www.facebook.com/iateflonline/videos/715047578897953/>
- Gray, J. (Ed.). (2013). *Critical perspectives on language teaching materials*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Greathouse, P., Eisenbach, B.B., & Kaywell, J.F. (2019) Preparing teacher candidates to be “Effective” in the classroom: Lessons learned from national teachers of the year. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 92(1–2), 39–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2018.1561405>
- Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.
- Höhne, T. (2003). *Schulbuchwissen : Umrisse einer Wissens- und Medientheorie des Schulbuches*. Frankfurt am Main: Johann Wolfgang Goethe University.
- Kachru, B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge University Press.
- Karakuş, E. (2021). A systematic review of the representation of cultural elements in English as a foreign language textbooks. *Language Teaching and Educational Research (LATER)*, 4(1), 13–29.
- Kidwai, H., Burnette, D., Rao, S., Nath, S., Bajaj, M., & Bajpai, N. (2013). *The policy and practice of public primary curriculum in India – A study of textbooks in public primary schools of district Morigaon*

- (Assam) and district Medak (Andhra Pradesh). Columbia Global Centers | Mumbai Working Paper Series (no. 11). [http://globalcenters.columbia.edu/mumbai/files/globalcenters\\_mumbai/MDEP\\_WP11\\_Textbooks%20Website.pdf](http://globalcenters.columbia.edu/mumbai/files/globalcenters_mumbai/MDEP_WP11_Textbooks%20Website.pdf)
- Kubota, R. (2001). Discursive construction of the images of US classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(1), 9–37.
- Kubota, R., & Lin, A. (2009). *Race, culture, and identities in second language education: Exploring critically engaged practice*. Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159–165.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
- McCarthy, C. (1990) Multicultural education, minority identities, textbooks, and the challenge of curriculum reform. *The Journal of Education*, 172(2), 118–129.
- Mohanty, A. K. (2017). Multilingualism, education, English and development: Whose development. In H. Coleman (Ed.), *Multilingualisms and development* (pp. 261–80). British Council.
- Motha, S. (2014). *Race, empire and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. (2019). New Education Policy (Draft).
- Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. (2005). Report of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) Committee on Free and Compulsory Education Bill and Other Issues Related to Elementary Education. [https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/fcebill.pdf](https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/fcebill.pdf)
- Naseem, M. Ayaz, Arshad-Ayaz, A., & Rodríguez Rodríguez, J. (2016) *Representation of minorities in textbooks: International comparative perspectives*. Santiago de Compostela: International Association for Research on Textbooks and Educational Media (IARTEM)] [https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/Draft\\_NEP\\_2019\\_EN\\_Revised.pdf](https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Draft_NEP_2019_EN_Revised.pdf)
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Phillipson, R. (2006). English, a cuckoo in the European higher education nest of languages? *European Journal of English Studies*, 10(1), 13–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570600590846>
- Shapiro, S., Farrelly, R., & Curry, M. (Eds.) (2018). *Educating refugee-background students: Critical issues and dynamic contexts*. Multilingual Matters.
- State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam. (2020). *Sunbeam English Reader – I*. Assam State Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. <https://www.dailyassam.com/2020/01/class-6-english-book-question-answer.html>
- State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam. (2020). *Sunbeam English Reader – II*. Assam State Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. <https://www.dailyassam.com/2020/06/class-7-english-book-pdf-file-assam.html>
- State Council of Educational Research and Training, Assam. (2020). *Sunbeam English Reader – III*. Assam State Textbook Production and Publication Corporation Limited. <https://www.dailyassam.com/2020/01/class-8-english-question-answer-2020.html>
- Styslinger, M. E., Stowe, J., Walker, N., & Hostetler, K.H. (2019). Becoming teachers for social justice: Raising critical consciousness. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 92(1–2), 9–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2018.1533797>
- Thomas, P. (2017). The portrayal of non-westerners in EFL textbooks in Norway. *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 1275411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1275411>
- Thornbury, S. (2013). Resisting coursebooks. In Gray, J. (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on language teaching materials* (pp. 204–223). Palgrave Macmillan.