MATCHING STUDENTS TO BOOKS

The Cultural Content of Eighth-Grade Literature Assignments

ABSTRACT

This study uses data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K), to examine the texts assigned to eighth-grade students. By comparing student demographic information from the ECLS-K with demographic information from the texts, we examine adjustment of assignments to match students' backgrounds. In addition to a list of the most frequently assigned texts in eighth grade, we found that the race/ethnic diversity of texts assigned to eighth graders in the mid-2000s did not match the diversity of the school-age population at that time. Considerable matching occurs in text assignments, such that minority students are in some cases substantially more likely to read texts with protagonists, and written by authors, that match their race/ethnicity.

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RECENT evaluations of educational performance in the United States find persistent gaps in reading achievement among students of differing race/ethnicity and social origins (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), with only modest declines in inequality accompanying standards-based reform efforts (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). In addition to continued variability in basic dimensions of opportunity to learn, such as access to high-quality teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Goldhaber, Lavery & Theobald, 2015), elements of the curriculum that are largely common between and within schools, but that may differentially affect students from varying backgrounds,

have emerged as a possible explanation for persistent educational inequality (Anyon, 2009). In particular, studies of culturally responsive teaching have drawn attention to the multiple facets of teaching and learning that intersect with students' cultural background, including (but not limited to) the cultural content of the curriculum itself (Banks, 1991; Delpit, 1995/2013; Gay, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010). Within English and language arts, the nature of the American literature curriculum, and its possible role as a common feature exacerbating reading achievement gaps, has been debated for decades.

In particular, the corpus of established books dominated by white, male, Anglo-Saxon perspectives and experiences (Applebee, 1993; Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2019), and the contrast of that to an increasingly diverse population (Colby & Ortman, 2015), raises questions about the cultural content of texts assigned to students. Moreover, differing perspectives on the nature and purpose of reading and literature instruction complicate the cultural and instructional judgments that are made, implicitly or explicitly, each and every time a book is assigned in a classroom (Applebee, 1993; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Because curricular decisions affect student engagement and learning, and because they communicate messages about whose stories and lives are worth reading about, decisions about text selections—whether those decisions are the result of individual teachers or institutional influences—are fraught with discord.

In the context of ongoing debate, documenting the book-length works assigned to American students continues to be of great interest. This study uses data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K), a longitudinal study that followed students from kindergarten to eighth grade, to examine the texts teachers assign to eighth-grade students. Although these data were collected during the 2006–2007 school year, this is the first time that nationally representative data on text assignments has been collected, and the ECLS-K data present a unique opportunity to examine how the assignment of texts is distributed across student demographics such as race, class, gender, and family structure. By comparing student demographic information from the ECLS-K with demographic information from the authors and protagonists of the texts, we can examine teachers' adjustment of assignments to match students' backgrounds.

What Books Are Assigned?

One of the most comprehensive and widely cited studies of literature curriculum was Applebee's (1993) study, which focused specifically on book-length works at the middle and high school level. Applebee (1993) analyzed genre, period, and author characteristics, finding that most required texts were fiction, the majority of which were novels (64%) or plays (25%) and the majority of which were written during the twentieth century, mostly between 1930–1959. One of Applebee's (1993, p. 77) goals was to explore the extent to which book-length works in middle and high school reflected a "White, male, Anglo-Saxon tradition." Applebee (1993) found that the selection of book-length works by women and "minority" authors increased only marginally over a 25-year period. Most titles were written by white (99%), male (86%) authors of American (58%) or British (33%) traditions. Of the top 27 most frequently taught titles, none were written by people of color.

Although scholarship documenting literature curriculum at the high school level is becoming increasingly outdated, the availability of data about literature curriculum at the elementary and middle level is even scarcer. Applebee's (1993) study offers a rare glimpse at middle school literature curriculum. He found that of the literature taught in grades 7–8, 70% of titles were written by male authors and 95.9% of literature was written by white authors. Examples of most frequently taught titles include in grade 7: *Call of the Wild*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *A Christmas Carol*; and in grade 8: *Diary of a Young Girl*, *Call of the Wild*, and *The Pigman*. Applebee's findings suggest that middle school literature curriculum, like high school literature curriculum, is dominated by works by white, male authors. Subsequent research, which has focused primarily on literature at a state level, suggests that the literature curriculum has changed only marginally over the past few decades (Anderson, 1964; Applebee, 1993; Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006; Stotsky, Goering, & Jolliffe, 2010).

Of course, it is likely that "the canon" of typical literature curriculum has expanded to some degree over the years. Well-known and often taught middle school titles include young adult and multicultural books that might be considered "new classics," such as *Bud, Not Buddy* or *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* by Christopher Paul Curtis, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor, or *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis, for example. That said, the existing body of scholarship, which has documented the stability of a narrow and traditional literature curriculum over the past 50 years, suggests that current middle school literature curriculum is likely to be characterized more by consistency than change.

Researchers have identified several factors that may help to explain the lack of change in the literature curriculum. Teachers report sticking with traditional literature selections because they are less certain or convinced of the literary merit of new selections; because they are more familiar with classic texts they studied in their own high school or undergraduate education; because they feel concern about potential community or parent response; or because standard texts are available and/or aligned to departmental policies (Applebee, 1993; Friese, Alvermann, Parkes, & Rezak, 2008; Ivey & Broaddus, 2000; Stallworth et al., 2006). Watkins and Ostenson (2015) found that although English teachers reported feeling a high level of autonomy, they make decisions in "challenging contexts" where resources are tight and the pressure of finding "one right text" for whole-group novel study constrains decisions.

The lack of diversity in literature curriculum may be linked to a lack of diversity in the publishing and recognition of children's and young adult literature more generally, which is particularly relevant for considering literature curriculum at the upper elementary and middle school levels. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) has been documenting the number of children's books by and about people of color and First Nations people for more than 40 years. In 2016, of 3,400 books, 92 were written by Africans or African Americans, 22 were written by American Indians/First Nations, 212 were written by Asian Pacific Islanders or Asian Pacific Americans, and 101 were written by Latinos (CCBC, 2019).

Similar trends are documented in award-winning children's literature as well. Koss, Martinez, and Johnson (2016) analyzed representations of human characters featured in Caldecott Award winners from the past 25 years. Their research of award-winning books revealed that 71% of main characters are white. In fact, the percentage of white main characters has increased from 55% to 90% since the 1990s. Main characters are

predominantly male (60%); no main character had a cognitive disability; only 12% had a physical disability; the religion of main characters is rarely addressed; and only one character is portrayed as living in poverty. This finding is pertinent, given that English teachers often look to award-winning literature to ensure literary merit.

The situation is not much better for representations of gender or sexual orientation in literature. Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, and Young (2006) explored sexism in a sample of 200 books, which included top sellers and Caldecott winners. They found that there were twice as many male main characters as female main characters; that males were more likely to appear in the illustrations; and that occupations were stereotyped. Moreover, a comparison of books from the 1980s to the 1990s did not show reduced sexism.

In addition, representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth is also lacking. In 2008, the American Library Association began publishing its annual Rainbow Book List of recommended titles of LGBTQ texts, noting in its inaugural list the difficulty they had finding books that presented LGBTQ in realistic, validating ways (American Library Association, 2008). Similarly, in a survey of U.S. public high schools, Blackburn and Buckley (2005) found that only 8.5% of responding schools indicated that they include LGBTQ texts in their literature curriculum.

In sum, statistics on book publishing have not changed much in more than 40 years, which means that teachers select literature from a pool that does not reflect the diversity of the United States or U.S. schools. In fact, Gangi (2008) emphasizes that booklists, book awards, school book fairs, book order forms, textbooks, and text for pre- and in-service teachers consistently privilege children's literature by and about white people, all of which place a burden on children of color as they learn to read and improve their reading achievement.

Who Gets to Read What?

Although research has explored what books are typically assigned, there is less available research to indicate how book assignments vary across student demographics. There has been some interest in whether literature curriculum varies by type of school, but Applebee (1993) found little variation between public schools, Catholic schools, and independent schools, for example. Rather, he noted an overwhelming narrowness of literature traditions represented across all three types of schools. Relatedly, in terms of geography, Willis and Palmer (1998) found literature by and about people of color to be particularly scarce in rural schools, which tend to be less racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse than many urban schools.

Research has also documented variation in text usage across academic tracks at the secondary level, finding that high-track or college-bound classes read longer and more difficult texts, including more classic texts, whereas lower-track classes are more likely to read young adult novels, contemporary novels, North American authors, women and minority authors, or use reading kits (Applebee, 1993; Gamoran, 1993). This finding likely reflects English teachers' efforts to support students' reading motivation and comprehension through engagement with accessible and high-interest literature. However, Northrop and Kelly (2019) found that literature curriculum not

only varies across tracks but that teachers overadjust curriculum, giving students in low- and regular-track classes texts that are even less rigorous than they could likely be successful with. In this study, low-track students are assigned texts about 50 Lexile points lower, relative to high-track students, than would be expected based on observed differences in achievement.

Given the emphasis on the importance of tailoring literature selections to individual students' abilities and interests (Ivey, 1999), a body of reading research has documented similarities and differences of students' reading preferences across individual demographics. Middle school readers consistently rank scary stories, sports books, comics, magazines, and adventure stories among their favorite things to read (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). And research has shown that these reading preferences are remarkably consistent in middle school readers regardless of gender, achievement, reading attitudes, and income level (Worthy et al., 1999). At the same time, however, middle school teachers admit that they rarely differentiate their literature selections according to individual students' abilities and interests (Tomlinson, Moon, & Callahan, 1998), although more recently case study research has shown that this may be shifting in favor of including more independent reading in class at the middle school level (Francois, 2013a; Francois, 2013b).

A critique that runs across studies of literature curriculum (e.g., Anderson, 1964; Applebee, 1993; Stallworth et al., 2006; Stotsky et al., 2010) is that literature does not reflect the demographic diversity of the United States. The student population of American schools is diverse, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects that the student population will become increasingly diverse (Hussar & Bailey, 2014). In 2008, shortly after the data used in this study were collected, 44.5% of public school students were nonwhite; 31% lived in poverty; and 21% spoke a language other than English at home (Aud et al., 2010). Research examining literature curriculum across student demographics has important implications, because literacy achievement gaps for students of color, for example, can be attributed in part to misalignment of curriculum and instruction with the cultural identities and out-of-school experiences of minority students (Banks, 1991; Delpit, 1995/2013; Gay, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, although this body of research (e.g., Applebee, 1993; Gamoran, 1993; Northrop & Kelly, 2019; Stallworth et al., 2006; Stotsky et al., 2010; Willis & Palmer, 1998) has examined the distribution of text assignments in terms of school type, course level, and academic track, research has not yet documented how literature curriculum is distributed across individual demographics, such as race, class, and gender. In other words, who gets to read what? This study constitutes the first of its kind to examine how the literature curriculum is assigned across student demographics.

Competing Perspectives on the Cultural Content and Complexity of School Texts

When teachers, curriculum directors, and other stakeholders select texts to assign, they must consider many facets simultaneously, such as cultural content, text complexity, prospects for student engagement, and the assignments, tasks, and supporting materials that accompany the unit (Friese et al., 2008; Watkins & Ostenson,

2015). Underlying myriad practical considerations are a few competing perspectives on the purpose for reading and literature instruction in American schools that also influence teachers' decisions: the cultural heritage model, the student-centered model, and the skills-based model (Applebee, 1974, 1993).

A cultural heritage model posits that all students should read a common literature curriculum to build a base of shared knowledge and cultural tradition (e.g., Hirsch, 1987; Stotsky et al., 2010). The cultural heritage model typically translates to the selection of "classic" texts or "great works." From this perspective, teachers typically select one or a few book-length works for whole-group novel study. Critics of the cultural heritage model question whose culture dominates typical curriculum, what constitutes a classic, and the way canons are constructed. Critics note that the typical middle and high school canon, which perpetuates a narrow worldview dominated by white, male, Anglo-Saxon perspectives (e.g., Applebee, 1993), teaches a hidden curriculum about what knowledge is valued, whose stories are worth telling, and whose voices are worthy of attention in whole-class novel study (Apple, 2004). Critics of this model also note that not all middle school and high school students are ready for the academic rigor of many classics; asking students to read challenging texts before they are prepared with requisite stamina or comprehension skills can further marginalize struggling readers (Franzak, 2008; Moss & Bordelon, 2007).

The student-centered model emphasizes students' engagement and appreciation of literature (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012) more than reading a common literature curriculum, with the ultimate goal of improving reading achievement and nurturing lifelong readers. In this approach teachers often select books based on student interest, and selections may include more contemporary literature, young adult literature, and literature that students choose individually. Student-centered teachers often try to match readers with books in terms of students' backgrounds, interests, experiences, or reading levels (e.g., Ivey, 1999; Ivey & Broaddus, 2000). Critics of the student-centered approach warn that prioritizing popular fiction over classics can create differences in opportunity, both in terms of practice with complex texts and access to high-status culture, as exposure to "classics" is often associated with the kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) valued in upper-track high school English courses, college-entrance materials, and college-level literature study (Jago, 2001; Schoenbach et al., 1999). From this perspective, if classic texts are *not* assigned, students may not have access to the high-status literary knowledge that is typically available in upper-track, college preparatory coursework.

In addition to matching readers with books, teachers who adopt a student-centered approach often select books that provide students with a range of both "mirrors" and "windows" (Bishop, 1990). Mirrors include books that reflect a student's own social or cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Mirrors may promote student engagement or comprehension by more readily connecting to students' own lives through familiar content or storylines (McNair, 2008; Tatum, 2008). Providing students with mirror texts is important to the extent that students perceive curriculum as being inclusive of and affirmative of students' racial and cultural experiences; when students see themselves or people who look like them represented in school curriculum, they may feel like school is a welcoming place and that reading is meant for people like themselves (Bishop 1990, 2007; Hinton & Berry, 2004; Larrick, 1965; Sims, 1982; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Moreover,

culturally responsive literature selections that portray authentic and nonstereotypical representations of characters from historically marginalized populations have been shown to support students' agency, engagement, and comprehension for students of color (Bishop, 1990; Brooks & Hampton, 2005; Kirkland, 2011; Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2016). Gangi (2008) argues that children of color must have equitable access to books that reflect their lives, their communities, and their families to have equal opportunities to become proficient readers.

Alternatively, window texts include books that introduce students to social and cultural experiences that are different from their own. Literature representing American multicultural and global perspectives, in concert with critical literature instruction, has the potential to help students develop personal, political, social, and intercultural understanding (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2007; Copenhaver-Johnson, Bowman, & Johnson, 2007; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Price-Dennis et al., 2016; Spears-Bunton, 1998). At the same time, window texts can be more challenging for students if content, language, or story structure is unfamiliar, or if the content creates cognitive dissonance with students' identities or values (e.g., Dressel, 2005; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Trainor, 2005). To provide a wide range of high-quality mirrors and windows for all students, advocates of a student-centered model have been working to broaden the literature curriculum for all students to better represent the diversity of the American and global population in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, religion, disability, and family structure since the 1960s (e.g., NCTE, 1972a, 1972b, 1986, 2014).

Finally, an essential language skills approach prioritizes practical or "essential" reading skills, and instruction may prioritize comprehension strategies, vocabulary instruction, or grammar drills (Applebee, 1993). In this approach, the literature selection sometimes takes a back seat to reading instruction, and nonfiction may receive more attention than fiction. Although direct and systematic reading instruction is important, critics of the skills-based approach warn against "back to basics" instruction that separates reading from a more authentic, holistic, literature-based curriculum. In other words, an overemphasis on skill-and-drill instruction can actually be detrimental to readers. Moreover, critics warn that a skills-based approach is too often relegated to students in urban schools or lower academic tracks (McCarthey & Mkhize, 2013).

As a result of these competing pressures, teachers may, at times, feel like they have to make trade-offs in text selection—by replacing the perceived rigor of commonly taught canonical texts, which often overrepresent white, male perspectives, with higher-interest literature that may be selected to represent perspectives of women, people of color, or LGBTQ perspectives, for example. That said, we also want to acknowledge that text complexity, diverse racial and cultural perspectives, and student engagement are not mutually exclusive. Teachers may find opportunities to manage competing pressures by selecting single texts—or offering students choices between a few preselected texts—that are complex or considered classics, that represent historically marginalized perspectives, and that are also highly engaging, such as *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, *March: Book One* by John Lewis, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily Danforth, or *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor, to name a few. Other possibilities for merging competing traditions include taking culturally responsive approaches to teaching canonical works

(Delpit, 1995/2013; Kirkland, 2011; Morrell, 2000), or teaching reading strategies in the context of high-quality and high-interest literature (Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2009). Broadly speaking, all students likely benefit from a rich mix of classic literature and high-interest young adult literature, with mirrors to help them make meaning of their own lives and windows for learning about the lives of people around the globe. Clearly, English teachers, curriculum directors, and other stakeholders are faced with a difficult task when selecting books, and their decisions have political and pedagogical implications no matter what they choose.

Current Study

The ECLS-K data set presented in this study offers a unique opportunity to see how texts are assigned to individual students and whether and how those assignments vary across race, class, and gender. In this study, we ask:

1. What texts are assigned to eighth-grade students?
2. To what extent do text assignments vary by gender, race, SES, and school sector, and is there evidence of adjusting text assignments to match student background?

Data and Method

This study uses data from the final year of the ECLS-K, a large-scale, nationally representative data set that followed students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Parents and teachers completed surveys, and students completed assessments in reading, math, and general knowledge or science at each wave of data collection (fall kindergarten and spring of kindergarten, first grade, third grade, fifth grade, and eighth grade). The ECLS-K has been used to study a variety of educational issues, including reading growth and literacy instruction (Chatterji, 2006; McCoach, O'Connell, Reis, & Levitt, 2006; Ready, LoGerfo, Burkam, & Lee, 2005); math instruction (Bottia, Moller, Mickelson, & Stearns, 2014); ability grouping (Hong, Corter, Hong, & Pelletier, 2012; McCoach, O'Connell, & Levitt, 2006); class size (Milesi & Gamoran, 2006); peer effects (Cho, 2012); and teacher qualifications (Phillips, 2010).

In the final year of the study, when the students were in eighth grade, the English teacher questionnaire asked for the title and author of the last three books the student was assigned to read in class. These text data come from a recent data entry by NCES and are available only to restricted-data users. These data were extensively cleaned by the authors (see Northrop & Kelly, 2019). Teachers provided information for approximately 17,680 book assignments (student-book pairings) for 7,430 students.[1] Approximately 4,280 students (57%) had three books listed, 1,700 students (23%) had two books listed, and 1,450 students (20%) had only one book listed. Our analytic sample of students includes 7,370 students whose teachers provided information on at least one book and for whom full sample design information (primary sampling units and Strata) is available. Among books, 1,480 unique titles were provided by teachers.

After identifying the 1,480 unique titles, each title was coded for a variety of characteristics, including type of text, author attributes, protagonist attributes, genre

attributes, and text complexity. Information about the books came from a variety of sources, including cover art, back-of-book summaries, book reviews, author websites, and, in some cases, skimming the book itself.

Text Properties

Text type. Four categories of text type were created: (1) authentic text, (2) publisher program, (3) student choice, and (4) generic title category. Authentic texts constitute 94.5% of texts assigned, and include books, short stories, or other collections written for authentic purposes; in other words, something you would likely find at a bookstore. This category includes a wide range of books, from traditional classics to modern trade books; examples of authentic texts include *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and *Things Not Seen* by Andrew Clements. Publisher program books include all titles specifically written for a school program, including textbooks like *Elements of Literature*, a short story or informational text published within a specific core reading program textbook, and novels written for publisher programs, such as the high-low Passages novels by Anne Schraff. When a teacher did not specify a title but stated the student self-selected a text, it was categorized as student choice. In addition to listing nonspecific student choice, teachers also gave genre-specific assignments, such as student choice of a historical fiction novel, or topic-specific assignments, such as student choice of a Holocaust book. Entries were only coded as student choice if they specifically used the term "student choice." The final category, generic titles, was used when a teacher gave a nonspecific title such as "Novel Classics" or "Short Story Collection," but it was unclear if the teacher assigned a specific book or if the student self-selected the text within the required category.

Author attributes. For each title, biographical information on the author was identified from the sources above, including gender, race/ethnicity, and nationality. Although this coding process surely contains more error than some text properties (e.g., date of publication), it is reliable enough to identify the basic patterns observed here (see reliability analysis in the section on Text Complexity).

Protagonist attributes. For each title, the main protagonist and, less frequently, up to two secondary protagonists were identified. However, in this analysis we focus on attributes of the main protagonist, as 87.8% of texts featured a single main protagonist. Each protagonist was then coded on a variety of demographic variables, including gender, race/ethnicity, and whether or not the protagonist was an animal. In addition, the age, family structure, and social class of the protagonist were identified. Age was divided into three categories: child, for protagonists who were 12 years old or under; teen, ages 13 to 19 years; and adult, 20 years or older. Family structure included two-parent families, including stepparents; single mother; single father; divorced with joint custody; a family relative as primary caretaker, such as a grandparent or aunt or uncle; a child with no adult supervision, such as orphans or runaways; and other, which included protagonists who were adults. There were no texts in the sample that included families with two moms or two dads.

To code the protagonists' social class, we use a collapsed version of the Gilbert-Kahl (Gilbert, 2014) subjective social class classification consisting of the privileged class (capitalist and upper-middle); majority class (middle and working); and lower class (working poor and underclass). In addition, we identified a special category

for protagonists who were enslaved, as well as a category for those in nontraditional class structures, such as protagonists who were Native American or novels that were set in futuristic societies.

Genre attributes. Overall genre was examined in two ways. The first categorization examined overall categories of texts based on divisions in Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, and Martin (2011), including narrative, informational, dramatic, and poetry. Narrative texts included novels, short stories, and narrative nonfiction, such as memoirs, biographies, and retellings of historical events. Informational text included textbooks, advice books, and informational pieces. The dramatic category included plays and scripts, and the poetry category included both individual poems and poetry collections. The second categorization was a more traditional division between fiction (novels, short stories, plays, scripts, and poetry) and nonfiction (information text along with memoirs, biographies, and historical accounts). In addition, all titles were coded with a more specific subgenre, such as realistic fiction, historical fiction, science fiction, mystery, and so forth.

Book attributes. Each title was coded for several book attributes, including year published, whether or not the book won a Newbery Medal, and a categorization developed for this study, whether or not the book was a "classic," "new classic," or not a classic. Although it was difficult to code whether or not a book is a "classic" or "new classic" reliably, we included these categories because not many books were award winners and we wanted a way to examine book reputation, even if it was subjective. Lacking a precise definition of what a classic text is, our goal was to determine whether or not a book was a classic based on a subjective rating of the general reputation of the book by a former eighth-grade English teacher, who is a part of the author team. Kinney (2009) offers a comedic definition of a classic: "I think [a classic] has to be at least fifty years old and some person or animal has to die at the end." In our rating the year of publication did in fact serve as an important criterion, insofar as books like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain or *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott were labeled as classics, whereas books tagged as "new classics" were books that were published more recently and have gained popularity in recent years but might not stand the test of time. Examples of books considered "new classics" include *Holes* by Louis Sachar and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling. Books coded as "not a classic" typically tended to be popular fiction, such as the Maximum Ride series by James Patterson. This rating of book reputation is certainly highly subjective but appears to have moderate reliability (see below) and to correlate with some concrete features of texts such as year of publication (rho = −.69) and Newbery award status, which correlates with the new classic designation (rho = .31).

Text complexity. To estimate text complexity, all books were matched with their Lexile score. Lexile levels are a quantitative estimate of how challenging a text is, and range from 0 to 2000. Although individual short stories do not have Lexile levels, if the collection or anthology that the story appeared in could be identified then the title was matched with the Lexile level for the overall collection. Many classic texts, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, have several different editions with different Lexile levels. If the publisher or edition of a text with multiple editions was not specified, the highest Lexile level available was matched to the title. We chose the highest Lexile level, as that level typically corresponded to the original text, as

opposed to an abridged version of the story or a version written in simpler prose (e.g., using modern-day English to rewrite a Shakespeare play). In addition, many older short stories, along with nonprose text such as poetry and plays, do not have Lexile scores. Thus, the average Lexile score in this data set is likely to be a conservative measure, as many frequently assigned texts, such as Shakespeare's plays, are missing Lexile scores (19.5% of assigned texts were missing a Lexile score).

To evaluate the reliability of text properties, a second expert rater, who was not part of the author team and was a former high school English teacher, coded a subset of 202 titles, including the 102 most often read texts (the top 100 including ties) and a random selection of 100 additional text titles. There was very high agreement on basic properties of the text, including type of reading; the genre; attributes of the author including gender, race, and nationality; year published; and whether the text was a Newbery award winner. For example, ratings of author attributes ranged from approximately 97%–99% agreement. Ratings of protagonist attributes were also generally reliable. In the interrater reliability (IRR) subsample, the two raters identified the same unique principle protagonist by name in 91% of cases, whereas the principle protagonist's attributes were identified with exact agreement in 83% (age) to 97% (gender) of cases (in many cases the attributes could be identified even if the protagonist's precise name was unclear in the text). In addition, Gwet's AC, a measure of IRR well suited for evaluating high-agreement rating tasks, for these categories ranges from .75 to 1.0, indicating low probability that the ratings are independent and due to chance (Gwet, 2008). The second rater was less likely to designate texts as classics or "new classics" in middle school literature (40% of texts instead of 56% of texts), but there was still moderate agreement for the classic variable (68% agreement). Because these designations are more subjective than the other categories we would expect more disagreement, but even here a Gwet's AC of .54 ($t = 10.84$, $p < .001$) suggests the ratings are not independent.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the overall prevalence of specific text properties. Next, a segregation analysis was used to describe the overall multinomial dispersion in texts attributable to various student-to-student differences (gender, race/ethnicity, household SES, sector, and track level). Mathematically, it is calculated from a collapsed file where counts of multinomial student attributes are stored for each text (e.g., 170 boys and 150 girls read *Call of the Wild*), and the dispersion of student groups across texts is summarized, treating each text as a nesting unit. Substantively, it captures whether or not different groups of students were assigned similar or dissimilar books to read. We report two measures of segregation, the information theory segregation index (H) and the index of dissimilarity (D). The index of dissimilarity is the most traditional measure of segregation and equals (expressed relative to the current topic) the weighted mean deviation of the proportion of students of a given identity (e.g., male) reading a given book from the population expressed as a fraction of its maximum:

$$D = \sum t_i |p_i - P| / 2TP(1 - P),$$

where t_i is number of students of a given identity for book i, p_i is the proportion of students reading book i, P is the population proportion of students with a given identity, and T is the total number of students of a given identity. D is sometimes described as referring to the proportion of all students of either identity who would need to transfer to a different book (school) to achieve totally even allocation. That definition applies very well to the present topic of books, but we would note that the practical need to keep organizational unit sizes approximately constant is seldom mentioned in the prior methodological literature (e.g., the size of schools can only be changed so suddenly, rather, students need to be *exchanged* across schools).

The information theory H (originating with Theil, 1972) takes a more complicated expression but is now used commonly in the study of schooling because it addresses multigroup segregation and is decomposable, accommodating multiple levels of analysis (e.g., both schools and districts). It can be interpreted as a measure of how diverse the composition of students reading individual books is, on average, from that of the overall population diversity. We present both D and H because, although highly correlated, it is possible for different measures of segregation to rank the level of segregation differently (although in these data both measures produce the same rank ordering in Table 3). In addition, D is entirely composition or scale invariant whereas H is not (see James & Taeuber, 1985; Reardon & Firebaugh, 2002; Reardon & Yun, 2003 for further discussion of these measures).

Measures of the students' demographic information, type of school attended, and track level of class assignment came from parent and teacher surveys in the ECLS-K. Participants in this study, after applying weights and controlling for survey design, were male (51%), white (59%), black (16%), Hispanic (18%), Asian (3%), and other race (4%). Approximately 90% of the students attended public school, with 66% of the students in on-grade-level English classes, 12% in below-grade-level English classes, and 20% in honors or high-tracked English classes. In the ECLS-K the household SES variable was standardized, and participants in this study were similar to the standardized mean ($M = -0.04$, $SE = 0.027$). By eighth grade, the students in the ECLS-K sample are no longer substantially clustered in classrooms.

Lastly, to explore the differences in text assignment to children with different background characteristics, we analyzed text property differences for specific subgroups of students, including gender, race/ethnicity, household SES, and school sector. In addition to looking at percentages of texts assigned different students, we also examined our data to see if teachers reported differently based on student demographics. Rates of missing data were slightly higher for boys: 18.7% did not have any texts listed and 45.9% had all three texts listed, compared with 17.2% and 48.7%, respectively, for girls. Rates of completely missing text data were slightly lower for whites (17.4%) compared with black (18.0%) and Hispanic (20.2%) students, with whites being more likely to have all three texts listed (48.5%) than black (43.6%) or Hispanic (44.2%) students. Students in the lowest quintile of SES were more likely to have no books listed (22.5%) than students in the highest quintile of SES (11.8%), and were likewise less likely to have all three texts listed (39.9% for low-SES students vs. 58.7% for high-SES students).

In addition to reporting prevalence rates (proportions) that take into account the ECLS-K sampling design, odds ratios from simple reduced-form logistic regression models (or linear regression coefficients where appropriate) were calculated to test

the statistical significance of the observed matches of particular types of students to particular types of text (e.g., a female student being assigned a text with a female protagonist). Although the simple difference in proportions can also be examined in these results, the odds ratio is the most commonly reported method of comparing differences in binary outcomes across predictor variables (see Long & Freese, 2014, for an applied discussion of methods for analyzing categorical dependent variables).

The logistic regression models were used simply to test the descriptive differences reported in the tables, one reduced-form model without any control variables for each row of the table. All analyses, with the exception of the segregation analysis (which was run using Stata's "Seg" module), adjust for survey design characteristics including eighth-grade cross-sectional weights ("C7CWO") and strata ("C7TCWSTR").

Multiple imputation was used to handle missing data on student background characteristics in the ECLS-K. Rates of missing data on the variables investigated in Tables 3–7 are generally low: there are no missing data for gender, less than 1% for race/ethnicity, school sector, track level; but, 10% of students were missing SES information. Missing data were imputed using multivariate chained equations (MICE) with $M = 20$. Student background variables were specified such that prediction equations included only logit, ordered logit, and linear regressions, rather than multinomial categories, and the MICE converged readily. The imputed data sets showed generally small departure from the nonimputed distributions. The most substantially imputed variable, SES, was shifted right in the imputed data somewhat; for example, 13.46% (unweighted) of students in the original distribution were in the lowest SES quintile compared with 14.22%, 14.15%, and 14.16% in the first, middle, and last imputation set. However, the results were nearly identical to the nonimputed data; thus, we present the multivariate imputation results (e.g., the relationship between SES and Lexile was identical to two significant digits, $\beta = 12.40$).

Results

What Books Are Assigned?

Table 1 shows the top 20 most frequently assigned texts in eighth grade, whereas Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for text properties for the approximately 17,600 student-book pairs in the data. The majority of texts teachers report assigning were authentic texts, comprising approximately 95% of the sample. Student choice books accounted for approximately 3% of the sample. The most popular title read in eighth grade was *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, which was assigned to 15% of the students in our sample.[2] The next most popular texts were *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (assigned to 12% of the students); *Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (assigned to 9% of the students); *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (assigned to 8% of the students); and *Night* by Elie Wiesel (assigned to 5% of the students). The mean year of publication was 1954, making the average text 53 years old in 2007 (median year of publication = 1967 with an interquartile range of 1948 to 1993).

Despite the fact that four out of the top five assigned texts were written by women, overall author gender favored males slightly when looking at book assignments: 52% to 46% of the 17,680 student-book assignments were written by males. However, there was little diversity in the author's race/ethnicity in the assignments, with

Table 1. Most Frequently Taught Book-Length Texts in Grade 8 in the ECLS-K

Title	Percentage of Students	Number of Students	Year Published
1. *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton	14.8	1,110	1967
2. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry	11.6	860	1993
3. *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank	8.6	640	1947
4. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee	7.7	570	1960
5. *Night* by Elie Wiesel	5.4	400	1956
6. *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck	5.0	370	1947
7. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor	4.7	350	1976
8. *Call of the Wild* by Jack London	4.2	310	1903
9. *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes	3.9	290	1959
10. *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare	3.6	270	1594
11. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell	3.4	250	1945
12. *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel	3.1	230	1968
13. *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens	3.1	230	1843
14. *Anne Frank* (play) by Albert Hackett & Frances Goodrich	3.0	220	1955
15. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain	2.8	210	1884
16. *My Brother Sam Is Dead* by James Lincoln Collier & Christopher Collier	2.7	200	1974
17. *Across Five Aprils* by Irene Hunt	2.6	190	1964
18. Student choice	2.6	190	
19. *Nothing but the Truth* by Avi	2.4	180	1992
20. *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes	2.4	180	1943

white authors comprising 87% of the sample and black authors comprising 10% of the sample. Hispanic authors were only 2.5% of the sample. Likewise, there was little diversity in the nationality of the authors of the assigned texts: 84% of the authors were American, followed by 10% British and approximately 4% German (due largely to the popularity of Anne Frank's diary).

Similar to author attributes, there was modest diversity in the protagonist attributes. The majority of protagonists in the 17,680 student-book assignments were white (80%). Likewise, male protagonists (70%) were far more common than females (with white males constituting 57.5% of all protagonists). Black protagonists comprised 12% of the sample, and Hispanic protagonists comprised only 2% of the sample. Not surprisingly, given that the students were in eighth grade, the protagonists were most likely be teenagers (52%), with 30% of the protagonists being children and the remaining 18% adults. Protagonists most often came from families that included a mother and a father (41%), with single parents, either mom or dad, comprising 10% of the sample. Another popular family structure was to do away with the adults in the story entirely, and 13% of the protagonists were either orphans or runaways. The majority of the protagonists came from the majority class (45%) or the lower class (39%) rather than from the privileged (capitalist and upper-middle) class.

Eighth-grade students most often read narrative or fiction titles. Ninety-three percent of titles in the 17,680 assignments were classified as narrative texts; examining genre by the more traditional fiction/nonfiction categorization shows that 88% of the assigned titles were classified as fiction. The most popular subgenres assigned were realistic fiction (41%), historical fiction (23%), and diary or memoir (9%).

Other book attributes included the reputation of the book, measured here by whether or not the book is a classic or has won a Newbery Medal. Approximately

22% of the texts assigned to students were considered "classics," with more recently published "new classics" comprising 40% of the sample. Only 14% of the texts assigned to eighth-grade students have won the Newbery Medal.

In addition to title reputation, another measure of academic rigor was the complexity of the text assigned. The mean Lexile level of texts assigned in this sample was 845. Although our mean Lexile level is likely a conservative measure due to missing data, we reason that even with the increase in text complexity that would come from including Shakespeare and other nonrated texts, this collection of books was not academically challenging enough for eighth-grade students by old standards. Prior to the increase in text complexity recommended by the Common Core State Standards, the old recommended range for sixth- to eighth-grade students, which would have been in place during the 2006–2007 school year when these data were collected, was 850–1010 (NGA & CCSSO, 2010).

Who Gets to Read What?

Table 3 reports measures of segregation, summarizing the unevenness in allocation of texts across several basic student characteristics. Reardon and Yun (2003) describe segregation values for H of .10–.25 as moderate and .25–.40 as high, and anything above .40 as extreme. Text segregation was at the moderate to high level for school sector (i.e., between private and public school students, $H = .286$) and for track level ($H = .254$). Likewise, students of different race/ethnicities ($H = .204$) and SES ($H = .150$) also experienced moderate text segregation. Text segregation was lowest for gender ($H = .083$).

A challenge in interpreting the summary segregation statistics is that they capture both potentially desirable as well as undesirable differences in text assignments. Thus, to further explore how different texts were assigned to students of different background characteristics, Tables 4–7 show text properties by select student background characteristics.

Table 4 shows that, overall, male and female students were assigned similar texts in eighth-grade English classes. The one exception was that girls were more likely to be assigned classic texts to read than boys (or = .871). Here, the reported probabilities (displayed as percentages) are simply the observed probabilities (computed in multiply imputed data, and adjusted for survey design effects). The odds ratios can be calculated directly from these probabilities, although they are model-based to provide tests of statistical significance, and they reference a comparison to all other students to maintain commonality in the estimation sample within and between tables. In interpreting these values, both the absolute probability (the rate/level at which students' encounter different kinds of texts without reference to any comparison group) and the odds ratio (the measure of association with student background) are meaningful.

Table 5 shows text properties of teacher-assigned books by student race/ethnicity. Black students were substantially more likely to read texts by black authors (e.g., a probability of .215 for black students vs. .065 for whites), and Hispanic students were more likely to read texts by Hispanic authors. Likewise, these students were more than three times as likely to read a text with a protagonist with the same race/ethnicity as themselves. However, in the case of Hispanic authors and protagonists,

Table 2. Text Properties in the ECLS-K Eighth-Grade Sample

	Sample Size	Value	Confidence Interval[a]
Reading type:	17,500		
Authentic text		94.5%	.935, .954
Publisher program		1.6%	.012, .021
Student choice		3.4%	.028, .041
Generic category		.4%	.003, .007
Year of publication:	14,900		
Mean		1954	1951, 1957
Median (interquartile range)		1967	1948, 1993
Author's gender:	15,030		
Female		45.7%	.440, .475
Male		51.5%	.497, .534
Two authors, one female, one male		2.8%	.021, .036
Author's race:	16,440		
White, non-Hispanic		86.3%	.847, .878
White, Hispanic		2.4%	.020, .029
Black		9.6%	.084, .110
Asian		1.4%	.011, .018
Native American		.3%	.001, .007
Author's nationality:	16,460		
American		83.4%	.820, .848
British		10.0%	.090, .113
German		3.7%	.031, .043
Other		2.9%	.024, .034
Main protagonist is an animal:	16,130		
Not an animal		96.1%	.953, .968
Animal		3.9%	.033, .047
Gender of main protagonist:	14,810		
Female		30.4%	.289, .319
Male		69.6%	.681, .711
Race/ethnicity of main protagonist:	14,490		
White, non-Hispanic		80.0%	.782, .817
White, Hispanic		2.1%	.017, .027
Black		12.1%	.106, .138
Asian		2.2%	.018, .027
Native American		3.6%	.030, .043
Age of main protagonist:	14,650		
Child (12 or under)		19.6%	.276, .317
Teen (13 to 19)		52.3%	.505, .540
Adult (20 or older)		18.1%	.166, .198
Family structure of main protagonist:	14,950		
Two parent (including stepparents)		41.3%	.396, .431
Single parent (mother)		2.9%	.024, .036
Single parent (father)		6.8%	.060, .078
Divorced, both parents		1.5%	.012, .020
Grandparent or other family relative		5.9%	.050, .068
Orphan or runaway		13.4%	.122, .147
Other (including protagonist is an adult)		28.2%	.265, .300
Social class of main protagonist:	14,870		
Privileged class (capitalist and upper-middle)		4.3%	.037, .050
Majority class (middle and working)		44.8%	.431, .465
Lower class (working poor and underclass)		38.5%	.368, .401
Slave		1.3%	.011, .019
N/A, nontraditional class structure		11.0%	.099, .123
Genre: overall categories:	16,940		
Narrative		83.4%	.820, .848
Informational		.5%	.003, .008
Dramatic		6.5%	.043, .056
Poetry		.4%	.003, .007

Table 2 (*Continued*)

	Sample Size	Value	Confidence Interval[a]
Genre: fiction vs. nonfiction:	16,680		
Fiction		88.4%	.873, .895
Nonfiction		11.6%	.105, .127
Genre: selected subcategories:	16,680		
Novel (realistic fiction)		41.4%	.397, .432
Historical fiction		22.7%	.210, .245
Diary or memoir		9.2%	.083, .102
Fantasy and science fiction		9.2%	.089, .111
Graphic novel		.1%	.000, .003
Canonicity (rough estimate of text reputation):	16,650		
Classic		22.4%	.208, .240
New classic		39.5%	.378, .411
Not a classic		38.2%	.364, .399
Newbery award status:	17,530		
Did not win		86.4%	.849, .877
Newbery winner		13.6%	.123, .151
Mean Lexile (text complexity measure)	14,110	844.9	838, 852

Note.—Estimates are weighted and adjusted for survey design characteristics. Standard errors range from 0.0010 to 3.61.

[a] 95% Confidence interval calculations use a logit transformation to assure a 0 to 1 interval.

the base rates were very low, such that even though the odds are two to four times higher that a Hispanic student will be assigned a text by a Hispanic author or featuring a Hispanic protagonist, the absolute probability was only around .05. In other words, although there was a strong association (captured by the odds ratio) between student race/ethnicity and the race/ethnicity of authors and protagonists, Hispanic and black students still encountered authors and protagonists of their own background much less often than white authors and protagonists. Black students were less likely to be assigned classic texts and were also assigned books with a lower Lexile level.[3]

    Table 6 shows text properties of teacher-assigned books by student SES. Like race/ethnicity, the results show some matching of protagonist characteristics to student characteristics, although less so than in the case of race/ethnic matching. For example, students from the lowest SES quintile were more likely to read books with protagonists from the lower class (probability of .477 vs. .356 for the highest quintile). Texts featuring privileged class protagonists were not common but are somewhat more likely to be read by high-SES students than low-SES students. We also saw differences in the academic rigor of the texts assigned students, with students

Table 3. Segregation of Texts by Student Background in the ECLS-K Eighth-Grade Sample

	Index of Dissimilarity (*D*)	Information Theory Index (*H*)
Gender (male, female)	.162	.083
Race/ethnicity (white, black, Hispanic, Asian, other)	.335	.204
SES quintiles	.272	.150
Sector (public, private)	.498	.286
Track level (low, regular, high)	.390	.254

Note.—SES = socioeconomic status.

Table 4. Selected Properties of Texts Assigned to Males and Females

	Student Gender		Odds Ratio
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male vs. Female
Female author	44.8	46.4	.945
Female protagonist	29.3	31.7	.891
Classic text	21.5	23.9	.871*
Newbery winner	13.4	13.4	.995
Lexile level[a]	844.7	846.1	−1.44

Note.—Estimates are weighted and adjusted for survey design characteristics. Standard errors range from 0.0084 to 5.3.

[a] Means and linear regression reported for Lexile levels.

* $p < .05$.

from the top SES quintile more likely to be assigned classic texts and texts with higher Lexile levels (a difference of more than 50 Lexile points between the lowest and highest quintile).

Table 7 shows text properties of teacher-assigned books by sector. As prefaced by the segregation analysis, we found noteworthy differences in the properties of texts assigned to public and private school students. Students who attend public school encountered greater text diversity and, in particular, were more likely to be assigned texts by black authors or featuring black protagonists. Private school students were somewhat more likely than public school students to read books where protagonists live in traditional two-parent families (probability of .676 vs. .579). We also found moderate differences in the social class of protagonists across school sectors; for example, 57% of the texts assigned to private school students featured protagonists from the majority or privileged class, compared with 48% for public school students. Students who attended public schools were more likely to be assigned texts whose protagonist is or had at one time been a slave; however, the overall percentage of protagonists who are enslaved is quite small

Table 5. Selected Properties of Texts Assigned to White, Black, and Hispanic Students

	Student Race			Odds Ratios	
	White (%)	Black (%)	Hispanic (%)	Black vs. Others	Hisp. vs. Others
Black author	6.5	21.5	10.2	3.342***	
Hispanic author	1.8	2.2	4.3		2.218***
Black protagonist	8.3	27.1	11.8	3.583***	
Hispanic protagonist	1.3	1.9	5.1		3.625***
Classic text	24.1	16.5	21.8	.631**	.942
Newbery winner	13.0	15.0	13.4	1.169	1.002
Lexile level[a]	851	817.5	844.5	−33.25**	−1.11

Note.—Estimates are weighted and adjusted for survey design characteristics. Standard errors range from 0.0030 to 10.9.

[a] Means and linear regression coefficient reported for Lexile levels.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Selected Properties of Texts Assigned by Student Socioeconomic Status: Quintiles 1 (Low) through 5 (High)

	Student SES			Odds Ratios	
	Low SES (Q1)	Middle SES (Q3)	High SES (Q5)		
	%	%	%	Q1 vs. Others	Q5 vs. Others
Protagonist's class:					
Privileged class	4.1	3.9	5.8	.962	1.56*
Majority class	36.5	44.5	46.6	.659***	1.10
Lower class	47.7	38.6	35.6	1.58***	.852*
Slave	1.3	1.2	.8	.918	.487
Classic text	15.9	20.1	31.7	.595***	1.87***
Newbery winner	16.9	14.8	10.7	1.40**	.726**
Lexile level[a]	811.3	840	867.8	12.40 (1.98)***	

Note.—Estimates are weighted and adjusted for survey design characteristics. Standard errors range from 0.0030 to 6.33. SES = socioeconomic status.

[a] Means and linear regression coefficient reported for Lexile levels.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

(approximately 1.5%). Students who attended public school were also less likely to be assigned challenging texts, with less exposure to classic texts and more to texts with a lower mean Lexile level.

Table 7. Selected Properties of Texts Assigned to Public and Private School Students

	School Sector		Odds Ratio
	Public (%)	Private (%)	Public vs. Private
Female author	46.1	40.9	.803
Black author	10.4	4.5	2.47**
Hispanic author	2.5	1.6	1.60
Female protagonist	30.4	31.2	1.04
Black protagonist	12.9	6.7	2.07**
Hispanic protagonist	2.2	1.5	1.43
Protagonist from intact family	57.9	67.6	1.52***
Protagonist's class:			
Privileged class	4.0	6.4	.611*
Majority class	44.1	50.9	.762*
Lower class	39.1	33.5	1.27*
Slave	1.6	.4	4.35**
Classic text	21.3	34.6	.513***
Newbery winner	13.6	11.4	1.23
Lexile level[a]	842.8	871.7	−28.88 (10.87)**

Note.—Estimates are weighted and adjusted for survey design characteristics. Standard errors range from 0.0023 to 9.48.

[a] Means and linear regression coefficient reported for Lexile levels.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Discussion

This study used the ECLS-K data from 2006–2007 to examine the texts assigned to eighth-grade students and to what extent those assignments varied by gender, race, SES, and school sector. Two overall findings emerged from this analysis of text assignment. First, the race/ethnic diversity of texts assigned to eighth graders in the mid-2000s did not match the diversity of the school-age population at that time. In 2007, approximately 55.9% of K–12 students nationwide were white (Aud et al., 2010, Table A-4-1), but in these data 80% of the protagonists and 86.3% of the authors assigned were white. These prevalence rates are closer to that of the enrolled school population of the early 1970s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000, Table 4-1). Second, within the context of those base rates, considerable "adjustment" or "matching" occurred in eighth-grade text assignments, such that minority students were in some cases substantially more likely to read texts with protagonists, and written by authors, that matched their race/ethnicity. Yet, despite this adjustment, minority students were more likely to be assigned a book featuring a main character different from them (e.g., 78.5% of the time for black students; in the first row of Table 5, $1.00 - .215 = .785$, converted to a percentage) whereas white students had a high probability of being assigned a book featuring a main character that shares their race/ethnicity (84.5%, not shown in Table 5).

What Books Are Assigned?

Although it's possible that diversity in text assignment may have changed in the decade since these data were collected, it appears that literature curriculum continues to evolve at a glacial pace. Two of the top five most frequently assigned titles in 2006–2007—*Diary of a Young Girl* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*—also appeared on Applebee's (1993) list of most frequently taught titles, and several others, such as *Call of the Wild* and *The Pigman*, also appear in both the ECLS-K data and the 1993 list. Literature curriculum continues to be dominated by "classics"—or "new classics" of a middle school canon—most of which are more than 50 years old. The newest title on the most frequently assigned list is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, which was published in 1993, almost 14 years prior to data collection in 2007. This finding is also consistent with previous studies, which establish that the canon continues to be a strong influence (Hale & Crowe, 2001).

Literature curriculum continues to be dominated by white authors. Of the titles teachers assigned, 87% were written by white authors. Past research has reported similar findings, of course, but the lack of change over decades is remarkable; in 2017, when national demographics indicate that more than half of Americans are people of color and after 40 years of advocacy for diversification, this finding is even more problematic now than it was in 1993 when Applebee reported it or in 1964 when Anderson reported it. Unlike most previous research, this study also examined the racial background of protagonists, finding that about 80% of books feature white protagonists. These findings are further confirmation of the lack of change in curriculum.

Literature curriculum continues to be unbalanced in terms of gender; 70% of protagonists are male. In this regard, things have changed marginally since Applebee's study in 1993. In 1990, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

published guidelines for a gender-balanced curriculum in English language arts, noting the invisibility of female authors and protagonists, especially in the traditional canon, as well as the limited roles in which female characters were depicted. This study suggests that literature curriculum should raise the same concerns today as it did in 1990.

In addition, although this study did not explicitly code for gender nonconformity or sexual orientation, overall there was a discernable lack of texts that featured LGBTQ youth, and they were included in none of the top 20 most frequently assigned texts. This is consistent with prior literature that finds that inclusion of LGBTQ texts in schools is very limited (Clark & Blackburn, 2009).

There may be some indication that lack of diversity in literature curriculum reflects a lack of diversity in the publishing industry, with less than 5% of books published being by or about people of color, for example (CCBC, 2019); but the dearth of diversity in publishing does not explain this finding in its entirety. Of course, there is much literature, both classic and contemporary, available for use in classrooms by and about women and people of color, for example. Rather, the stagnation of literature curriculum is perhaps more attributable to the dominance of a cultural heritage model of literature instruction. In addition, it is important to recognize that the majority of the titles in Table 1 do offer critiques of traditional power structures, exploitation, and privilege, even though they are written by white authors and feature white protagonists. Thus, teachers may see the existing canon as offering valuable cultural lessons to students. That said, literature curriculum both reflects and reinforces power imbalances that we see in society more generally. This imbalance has implications for all students; all students learn problematic lessons from a hidden curriculum (Apple, 2004) that overrepresents dominant identities and views while underrepresenting identities and perspectives of historically marginalized populations. To achieve a literature curriculum that is equitable for all students and that prepares all students with social, cultural, and intercultural understanding (e.g., Beach et al., 2007; Copenhaver-Johnson et al., 2007; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Price-Dennis et al., 2016; Spears-Bunton, 1998), all students—white students and students of color—would benefit from reading a diversified literature curriculum that more accurately reflects the diversity of the United States and the world.

Who Gets to Reads What?

Connecting data on the representation of white authors and characters with readership, this study finds that although there is evidence that teachers adjust literature selections for individual students, literature selections are not distributed evenly or equitably among all students.

First, white students are assigned more mirrors and fewer windows than their peers of color. This finding suggests that literature curriculum privileges white readers whose racial and cultural identities are more likely to be affirmed through curriculum and whose engagement and comprehension is more likely to be supported through familiar experiences and storylines. Scholarship often discusses the drawbacks of a white-dominated literature curriculum on students from historically marginalized racial populations, but it is detrimental to white students as well. Bishop (1997, pp. 1–2) warns that white students are "miseducated to view themselves and

their lives as 'normal,' and to interpret their own cultural attitudes and values as 'human nature,' and to view other people and other lives as exotic at best, and deviant at worst."

Students of color read a few mirrors and many white windows. There is evidence that teachers adjust literature selections to match readers' racial or cultural backgrounds; black students are more likely to read books by black authors and Latino students are more likely to read books by Latino authors. That said, although black and Latino students are more likely to read literature by and about black and Latinos respectively, they read far more literature by white authors and about white characters. This finding suggests that literature curriculum may marginalize readers of color, who are less likely to see their racial and cultural identities affirmed through literature curriculum and whose engagement and comprehension may be challenged by unfamiliar experiences and storylines. Tatum (2008) advocates for textual lineages, which describe a wide range of culturally responsive texts that African American males, for example, might find meaningful in their lives.

Similar arguments might be made about gender. Although progress has been made on author gender (51% of book-length works are written by male authors), the book's content still largely reflects a gender imbalance. Seventy percent of books feature a male protagonist, meaning that girls are far more likely to be assigned books about boy protagonists than boys are to be assigned books about girl protagonists. In addition, we found little evidence of teacher adjustment to match protagonist gender when assigning books. Lack of gender balance is detrimental to both boys and girls, limiting and negatively influencing attitudes, aspirations, and worldview. This finding may also reflect sexism in children's and young adult literature more generally, which finds gender stereotyping and a lack of female characters, even in recent and award-winning books (Hamilton et al., 2006). The lack of LGBTQ youth is also noticeable. Inclusion of LGBTQ texts allows students to see multiple conceptions of sexual and gender identities, as well as acts to disrupt the norms of both sexuality and gender and the norms of families and homes (Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth, 2015).

Literature that reflects students' individual identities and which speaks to familiar racial, social, and cultural storylines may support comprehension, engagement, and the development of healthy reading identities for individual readers. Currently, students from racially, socially, and culturally dominant perspectives benefit from these matches more than students from historically marginalized populations. A diversified literature curriculum, one that offers a more equal selection of mirrors and windows for all students, may contribute to a more level playing field. To speak to individual readers, those books must include a wide representation of characters and storylines that offer authentic, diverse, nonstereotypical representations and intersectionalities, including those of a nonheterosexual orientation (Bickford, 2018), presented through a range of classic, contemporary, and young adult literature. A more diverse and engaging curriculum may help stem the decline of reader motivation that occurs in middle school (Parsons et al., 2018).

Of course, we cannot assume matching the racial identity of a character, for example, with the racial identity of a reader will result in engagement. Students' identities are complex, dynamic, and intersectional, and students engage with texts for a wide variety of reasons, including opportunities to read about characters whose

lives look nothing like their own. All students need a variety of both mirrors and windows across a variety of genres to engage and challenge them as readers.

Although "classics" or "new classics" continue to dominate literature curriculum, classic texts are not assigned evenly among all students. Whereas students attending private schools are assigned more classics and books with higher Lexile levels, students of color and students of low SES are assigned fewer classics and books with lower Lexile levels. This finding builds on and extends a recent study by Northrop and Kelly (2019), which found that teachers overadjust literature curriculum, underestimating the Lexile level with which students could be successful. As such, literature curriculum does not challenge all students equally. Because classic and canonical literature often functions in a gatekeeping capacity for college-bound students, this study suggests that a literature curriculum devoid of classics or complex texts may marginalize students of color and students of low SES.

Does an injunction to identify texts that are both culturally diverse as well as appropriately challenging push the limits of teachers' ability to revise the reading curriculum? Although we acknowledge that sticking to classics and new classics provides teachers with some reassurance they are teaching the "right texts," it is important to note that challenging or rigorous literature selections are not synonymous with "classics," and such texts can incorporate diverse voices. Teachers and educational leaders can prioritize those classics written by and about people from historically marginalized populations, they can select a wider range of texts that may not be considered classics but which are complex and challenging, and they can make efforts to ensure that all students are reading literature at appropriately high Lexile levels. As authors like Jacqueline Woodson, Alex Gino, Louise Erdrich, Jason Reynolds, Gene Luen Yang, David Levithan, An Na, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Matt de la Peña, among others, become increasingly well known, elementary grade teachers will soon find the teachers in their own building are already teaching such texts.

For individual teachers who may need assistance selecting challenging, culturally diverse texts, there are many resources available to guide teachers as they make decisions about selecting texts for all students (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2013; Graves, Juel, Graves, & Dewitz, 2011; Rush, Ash, Saunders, Holschuh, & Ford, 2011). Resources include the *School Library Journal*, the Cooperative Children's Book Center, the *MultiCultural Review*, the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpré Award, the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award; the American Indian Youth Literature Award; the Asian/Pacific American Award; the Stonewell Award, #weneeddiversebooks, and #ownvoices. NCTE has also published guidelines for the selection of materials in English language arts programs, which includes consideration of literature curriculum that is diverse and gender-balanced (e.g., NCTE, 1972a, 1972b, 1986, 2014).

Limitations

Although this data set provides a unique glimpse of what texts middle school students are assigned, this research is not without limitations. First, the data come from the 2006–2007 school year, which makes the text assignments somewhat outdated. This research relies on teacher self-report of the titles assigned their students,

and it does not include any reliability checks on the accuracy of these data. One challenge in self-reported data on instruction is the difficulty of recall over an extended period. In these data, nontrivial levels of nonresponse indicate that difficulty. However, occasion-specific measures of instruction are inefficient; in this case, because students spend extensive time on book-length texts, getting a sense of multiple texts per student would require extensive data collection. In addition, because the survey asked for three titles in one class (English), it only provides a snapshot of the texts assigned eighth-grade students, not a comprehensive report of the entire eighth-grade curriculum or of the texts students may be assigned across all of their core classes. Lastly, the teacher surveys offer no information about what types of instruction are paired with each specific text; simply knowing that a Shakespeare play was assigned provides a limited understanding of what is actually happening in the classroom. Although this study did rest on a single question in the ECLS-K, it provided a unique opportunity to pair the text assignments with student demographics.

Notes

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1. Numbers rounded to the nearest 10 in accordance with NCES restricted-data use rules.

2. For the percentage of students assigned a specific title, we calculated the percentages using the number of students (7,430), reasoning that a student could not be assigned the same title twice. In calculating all other statistics (for example, percentage of protagonists that are white) we calculated the percentages using the number of student-book assignments (17,680) to better capture the overall picture of text assignments.

3. The standard errors and 95% confidence intervals for the odds ratios are a function of the sample sizes in each group and are generally relatively wide because minority group comparisons are being made where as little as 10% of the sample falls in the minority group (e.g., for private school students). For example, the confidence interval (CI) for the Public vs. Private odds ratio point estimate of the prevalence of classic texts (.513) in Table 7 has a lower bound of .401 and an upper bound of .656. The Black vs. Others point estimate of 3.342 in the first row of Table 5 has a CI of [2.50, 4.47]. Nevertheless, because the differences in odds of reading varying texts is so great, many of the odds ratios are statistically significant even at the .001 level.

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