



# Empowered by Reading

## The Benefits of Giving Youth Access to a Wide Variety of Reading Materials

There are many important benefits of providing children and youth with a wide variety of developmentally appropriate reading materials – books which reflect their personal life experiences, as well as the experiences, stories, and histories of others in and beyond their communities. Reading books that represent a range of perspectives promotes student achievement, enhances youth wellbeing, and contributes to community cohesion. Trusted adults, including teachers, school librarians, and public librarians work to provide access to high-quality reading materials and teach youth to read them critically.

### Promoting student achievement and wellbeing

Encouraging students to read is profoundly important. Reading skills

affect all other aspects of learning in school, as well as future opportunities in career and life. Research has demonstrated that access to books can outweigh the academic

disadvantages of poverty. Youth read more when they can choose what they read and find what they are reading to be interesting and relevant to their lives. When they read more,

“When we provide students with texts that tug at their hearts, open their minds, or touch their souls, **we are fueling interest, which fuels engagement, which fuels learning.**” —Jenny Eisenman<sup>1</sup>

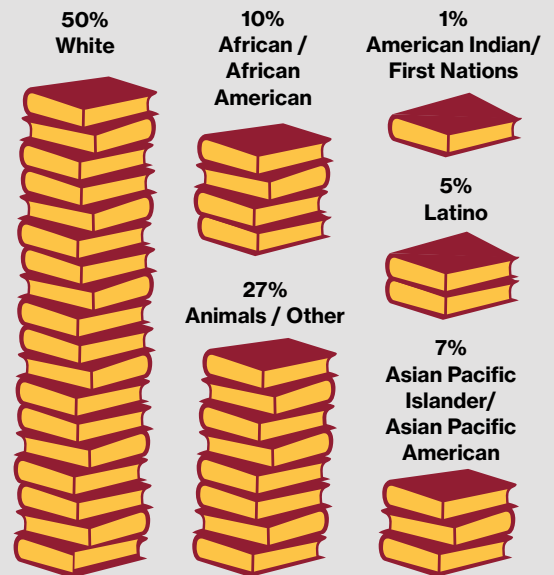
### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Providing children and youth with access to a wide variety of reading materials in which they can both see themselves and experience the lives of others benefits the individual reader as well as the community.
- ▶ Books that engage readers with relevant and authentic stories encourage deeper and more prolific reading which, in turn, improve students' academic achievement, wellbeing, and future opportunities.
- ▶ Books on controversial and challenging topics create bridges for difficult conversations with parents and other trusted adults and help youth critically navigate their world.

## REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A 2018 study from the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison found just 1% of children's books depicted American Indian/First Nations characters, 5% portrayed Latino characters, 7% Asian Pacific Islander/Asian Pacific American, 10% African/African American, 27% Animals/Other, while 50% depicted White characters.<sup>2</sup>

Elementary and secondary school students in the United States have a wide variety of backgrounds. **Educators and librarians strive to provide readers with materials that authentically reflect those backgrounds and the larger world in which they and their peers live.**<sup>3</sup>



“ Growing up, I was the only mixed person in my school. I wasn't allowed to play princesses because there wasn't a dark princess. When I moved and went to a more diverse high school I was still alone because of my sexual orientation. **Books allowed me to find people who are and were like me and in that never feel alone.**” — DeAnna S.<sup>4</sup>

“ **Parents also agree reading is a way to help their child understand different points of view and help their children find their place in the world.** And, just as many adults turn to books to help us through difficult times, many parents have also seen how the right story can support their child through life's challenges – a finding that children themselves agree to be true.”

— Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report<sup>5</sup>

their reading abilities improve, fueling a virtuous circle.<sup>6</sup>

Giving children and youth access to books that they can personally relate to encourages reading, improving reading outcomes and student wellbeing. One bilingual teacher described how her Spanish-speaking second graders became much more engaged in reading

when she substituted standard elementary texts with books that reflected the social and cultural experiences of her students.<sup>7</sup> Similar results were found when African American students in grades two to eight read culturally relevant books whose characters, places, and events reflected their own experiences. Reading engagement

deepened, and comprehension scores improved.<sup>8</sup>

### Encouraging critical thinking and family connection

Books that reflect the complexity of our society and thoughtfully address difficult and controversial issues can be valuable tools in helping young people explore the struggles of others and the consequences of decisions.

In one study, teachers provided eighth grade students with collections of young adult literature that had positive reviews, many containing “disturbing” but also personally relevant topics. As a result, students read more, and students and caregivers reported improvements in student achievement, personal growth, development of empathy, as well as improved caregiver/teen relationships. Among other things, the books presented youth and their families with opportunities to talk about challenging topics. As one parent said, “The books give us an excuse, permission to discuss things with [our child] that might be harder to talk about otherwise.” The books

## SAFER SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Students who attend schools with LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum and materials report feeling safer and experiencing less harassment than their peers in schools without inclusive curriculum and materials.



Only  
**19.6%**

of LGBTQ students report the inclusion of LGBTQ-related topics in textbooks or assigned reading.

Only  
**48.9%**

of LGBTQ students report that they could find books or information on LGBTQ-related topics in their school library.<sup>9</sup>

“As our nation continues to diversify, it is essential that children learn to understand the important role of their culture and the cultures of other people in creating an overall global culture respectful of differences.”

— Jamie Campbell Naidoo<sup>10</sup>

also helped students grapple with the experiences of close family members on topics like the difficulties posed by teen pregnancy or having a sibling with a disability.<sup>11</sup>

### Fostering community cohesion

Giving youth access to a wide variety of reading materials has significant value at the community level as well. Reading books that feature people or situations that young people have little direct experience of in their own lives can help foster empathy, tolerance, and connection. Literature can act as a window, enabling readers to put themselves in the shoes of people living lives different

from their own.<sup>12</sup> Peering through the window of literature allows readers to consider the complexities, nuances, and difficulties of a variety of situations. This includes learning about different cultures, traditions, religions, and family situations. For example, a read-aloud of a book with a child protagonist who has a parent who is incarcerated, encouraged fifth grade students to reflect on the impact of incarceration on families and helped students who had experienced this personally to feel more comfortable talking about it.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, when kindergarten-age Korean American children read a variety of picture books dealing with racial equality, discrimination,

freedom, and racial diversity, their attitudes changed over time. Among other things, the children's previously negative attitudes were visibly reduced, and they were more open to making diverse friends.<sup>14</sup> Those benefits extend to older students. Research shows that when schools offer an inclusive curriculum, including relevant reading materials, LGBTQ+ students feel safer and encounter less bullying. They also report better mental health and academic outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

Access to books – including and, perhaps, especially those that raise difficult questions – is integral to healthy development for young people and our communities. When we ban or

“When we censor, we discourage open discussion instead of building our **children's capacity to think for themselves.**”

— Jerie Blinnt<sup>16</sup>

## READING WITH A CRITICAL EYE

Teachers and librarians help students learn how to read and critically reflect on challenging books. Rather than shielding youth from literature on controversial topics, we should help students learn to navigate these narratives. This gives young people an opportunity to reflect on moral questions, changes in social norms, differing points of view, and the impact of historical events on the present.



restrict access to books, we deprive young people of the opportunity to see themselves reflected in stories, to fully engage in their learning, and to grapple with the complexity of the real world in which they live and must learn to navigate. In our pluralistic and democratic society, every book has its reader, and professional educators and librarians connect youth with those books that nurture literacy, critical thinking, and other skills and dispositions necessary for future success.

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## YOUTH WANT ACCESS TO BOOKS

Recent years have seen rising numbers of demands to ban or restrict youth access to books in schools and libraries. This is nothing new — through history, access to many books that are now considered classics, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Brave New World*, and *Beloved* have been restricted. Yet, young people themselves are often the starkest defenders of access to information. **In 2021 only 1% of challenges to books were brought by students.**<sup>17</sup>



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## ABOUT UNITE AGAINST BOOK BANS

Unite Against Book Bans, an initiative of the American Library Association, is a broad coalition of organizations and individuals that believe:

- Reading is a foundational skill, critical to future learning and to exercising our democratic freedoms.
- Books are tools for understanding complex issues. Limiting young people's access to books does not protect them from life's complex and challenging issues.
- Individuals should be trusted to make their own decisions about what to read.
- Parents should not be making decisions for other parents' children.
- Young people deserve to see themselves reflected in a library's books.

Learn more at [UniteAgainstBookBans.org](https://UniteAgainstBookBans.org).

