

# The Safe School Coalition's



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## Guidelines for Identifying Bias in Curriculum and Materials\*

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**A**s we discover how to better teach and apply the principal of equity in our schools, we are placing increasing emphasis on cultural pluralism. This means moving away from the “melting pot” philosophy, in which it was thought desirable for different people to give up their differences in order to blend together.

It means a move toward what has been called the “salad bowl” philosophy, in which differences are preserved and contribute to the desirability of the whole. This “salad bowl” philosophy incorporates the belief that the diversity of race, custom, color, religion, age, physical appearance, gender, gender expression and identity, and sexual orientation is a positive and essential characteristic of our nation and its heritage. It makes room for all.

The schools, of course play a highly significant role in promoting or negating this constructive view. The curriculum by which students learn shares this role with the teacher and other school staff. Attitudes expressed or modeled in materials, as well as by people, work against the development of culturally pluralistic education if they relegate groups of people to secondary or inferior status. A curriculum may perpetuate these attitudes and the behaviors they cause (including hate violence), if it omits the history, contributions and lives of a group, if it demeans a group by using patronizing or clinically distancing language, or if it portrays a group in stereotyped roles with less than a full range of human interests, traits and capabilities.

Stereotypes with which this document concerns itself are those associated with:

- **Ethnicity**
- **Gender**
- **Sexual Orientation**
- **Religion**
- **Socioeconomic Status**
- **Gender Expression & Identity**
- **Physical Disabilities**
- **Age**
- **Family Structure**
- **Native Language**
- **Occupation**
- **Body Shape/Size**

Terminology for various identity groups varies. We are aware of that variance. We have listened to our colleagues who belong to various groups about their personal preferences for referring to their own People. We realize that those preferences may differ from the reader's and may change over time. We have used the terms Black and African-American interchangeably; we've used Latino and/or specific countries of origin; we've used Native American and/or identified people as belonging to specific tribes; we've used Gay primarily to refer only to men so that Lesbians would not be rendered invisible; we have used Asian and Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander, rather than lumping people together, when a country of origin couldn't be specified.

The following examples may help identify bias in these areas. No attempt has been made to prepare an exhaustive list of indicators of bias. We offer this as a starting point.



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\* Adapted, with permission by Beth Reis for the Safe Schools Coalition from “Washington Models for the Evaluation of Bias Content in Instructional Materials” originally published in 1992 by OSPI, the Office of the [Washington State] Superintendent of Public Instruction.



# STEREOTYPES

## Example

Members of each identity group are presumed to share a monolithic, usually exotic “lifestyle” which does not include such mundane acts as doing the laundry, watching t.v., or going to work

## Example

African Americans are depicted as violent; living only in ghettos; employed only as singers, servants or athletes; often only as unemployed.

## Example

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people are portrayed only as angry protesters; only in Mardi Gras-type sexually-provocative parade costumes; or only in the context of HIV/AIDS. Native Americans are depicted as people of the past; as savages; or only in the context of alcoholism or fetal alcohol syndrome. Japanese American people are mentioned only in the context of World War II. Latinos are depicted only as sleeping or in the context of migrant farmwork.

## Example

Boys are depicted as doing; girls, as watching. Women/girls are depicted only in relationship to men/boys (husbands, sons, bosses); as silly, timid, and interested in trivial things. Men are portrayed only as sexual aggressors; women, as naturally responsible for setting sexual limits.

## Example

Only nuclear families with heterosexual parents and two to four children are portrayed. Couples are always portrayed as young, able-bodied, heterosexual and parenting.



Image by Mary Dispenza and Kindness of the LGBT Child Care Task Force.

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## Alternative

*All identity groups are depicted in diverse contexts reflective of their internal diversity, as well as their everyday lives.*

## Alternative

*All identity groups are portrayed as equally independent/dependent, leaders/subordinates, peaceable/militant, open/private, thoughtful/impulsive, etc.*

## Alternative

*All identity groups are portrayed sometimes as able-bodied, sometimes as healthy, sometimes as ill and sometimes with disabilities.*



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## Alternative

*People of both genders are depicted in traditional as well as non-traditional gender roles in the family, at work and at play; both as capable of taking sexual responsibility; both as having sexual desires.*

## Alternative

*In addition to the traditional nuclear family, families are depicted in which there are single parents, foster children, step-parents, same-sex parents, and/or relatives living with the family. Extended families are depicted, and emphasis is placed on roles and relationships, rather than physical proximity. Couples that do not have children are still described in some cases, as “families.” People of all varieties are depicted as capable of loving.*

# LANGUAGE

## Example

Materials encourage majority students to help non-majority people, who are spoken of as less fortunate, needy, disadvantaged, and victimized — all terms which are patronizing and depict non-majority people in terms of the ways in which they may have less than majority people, with the implication that perhaps they are to be pitied.

## Example

Humankind is referred to by the generic he and certain other phrases exclude women. (“Anyone wishing to go must show his student body card.”)

## Example

Terms are imposed on identity groups that most members of those groups no longer use to describe themselves. African Americans are identified as Negroes; women, as girls or gals; Gay and Lesbian people as homosexuals or homosexual males/females. None of these is a term of respect. In the first few years a term-of-choice is undergoing change, speakers’ use of it can be excused. Eventually, to pretend not to know the respectful term is to show active disrespect.

## Example

Some non-English phrases are misused. The term macho is misused to designate chauvinism. The term siesta is distorted patronizingly to indicate a time of laziness during a normal working day.

## Alternative

*Non-majority people are spoken of as having equal worth to majority people, as having points of view with equal value, having equal right to society’s benefits, and, when appropriate, as being victimized or unfairly treated by majority customs and institutions which fail to acknowledge the human dignity of all. The right of non-majority people to decide what is best for themselves is acknowledged; the right to protest injustice is honored.*

## Alternative

*He is no longer assumed to be generic. There are several widely used generic forms; he/she, his or her, s/he. Their may be used when grammatically correct, and is often used in conversation even when not traditionally correct. Changing to plurals often helps. (“All those wishing ... their student body cards”).*

## Alternative

*African Americans are identified as such, or as Black, since the term of choice is still in flux, but not as Negro, except in a historical context. Women are called women or young women or teenaged women, unless they are preteens. The terms Gay and Lesbian are used most, if not exclusively, when referring to people who are primarily attracted to partners of their own gender. The term homosexual might be used when referring to a kind of touch, rather than a human being. When terms male and female are used as nouns, they’re reserved primarily for species other than humans (“ten chimpanzees, all males”).*

## Alternative

*The Mexican word machismo or macho is properly used to mean masculine pride, bravery and responsibility. The term siesta is properly identified as a noon break in tropical climates, after which work is resumed into the cooler evening.*

## Guidelines for Identifying Bias

# OMISSION, EXCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVE

## Example

Non-majority and women’s contributions to history, science, etc. are sometimes completely omitted.

## Example

When non-majority and women’s contributions to humankind are included, they are segregated into special chapters or bordered boxes.

## Example

When included, these contributions are either not identified as having been made by women or non-majority individuals (i.e., the author, or scientist or statesperson is not identified as Jewish or epileptic or Gay, so that the child who may be one of these is effectively denied a hero or role model), or the way in which they are identified implies that the person’s non-majority status, rather than his/her achievements, is his/her primary claim to fame (e.g., “James Baldwin, Black, Gay author”).

## Example

Everyone is assumed to be heterosexual and to have only heterosexual feelings and relationships. In a puberty lesson, the changes one can expect are listed and the list includes “more crushes and attractions on the opposite sex.”

## Example

All illustrations and photos are of young, able-bodied, thin, traditionally-attractive individuals.

## Alternative

*Non-majority and women’s contributions are reflected in the curriculum, on classroom walls, and in classroom discussion.*

## Alternative

*The contributions of women and non-majority persons are interwoven with the rest of the text, as they are in life.*

## Alternative

*An author or other historical figure’s hidden disability, gender orientation, and/or religion are identified, as a natural part of describing his or her life (e.g., “James Baldwin, American author of many works, including Native Son and Another Country, lived from 1924 to 1987. He was a vocal participant in both the Black and Gay civil rights movements.”)*

## Alternative

*Materials and educators acknowledge the existence of homosexual feelings and relationships and of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual people. At a minimum, they avoid excluding them. The puberty list either says “more crushes on people of one sex or the other or both sexes” or, at least, drops the phrase “on the opposite sex”.*

## Alternative

*Examples of all different ages and body types are visible, including people of size, people with crutches and wheel chairs, and people with birth marks and other physical “differences.”*



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