



## CHAPTER 5

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# Kids These Days: Ethnographic Evidence on the Impact of Textbook Misrepresentation

**Abstract** To expand on the importance of culturally relevant curricula and textbooks, this chapter features the voices of students themselves, who attend various schools in far Northern California. Each have their own backgrounds and personal stories tied to their cultures, but much of their points are the same. They wish for things like teachers who understand their experiences and classroom activities and textbooks that include Native and other BIPOC experiences. Highlighting student voices and perspectives shows the dire need facing the US school system today when it comes to curricula being taught.

**Keywords** Ethnography • Focus groups • Interviews • Far Northern California • Teachers • Curricula • BIPOC • Student perspectives

### STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE CURRICULA

While spending hundreds of hours in schools and classrooms carrying out the ethnographic portion of my research, I reviewed not only textbooks but also supplementary readings, films, school posters, murals, and mascots to broadly assess how representation might impact student wellbeing. Findings show that a significant portion of education media in the US

history curriculum either contributes to misrepresentation of the communities of origin of BIPOC students or demonstrates a deafening silence that renders BIPOC contributions to past and present contemporary society invisible.

Some educators and administrators have found innovative ways around this harm and are working hard to include students from many backgrounds, while others continue to systemically exclude them. I present a sample of representative student and alumni voices that speak to their experiences of their own identities represented in the curriculum.

Maurice Alvarado<sup>1</sup> graduated from Eureka High School in 2019 and identifies as a Yurok descendent, meaning he is not tribally enrolled but has Yurok heritage. In 2019, Maurice was one of the first two students to successfully complete the California State Seal of Biliteracy (SSB) in Yurok, a prestigious accomplishment demonstrating advanced-level Yurok language skills—something only eight students have achieved to date in the whole state. I interviewed Maurice in 2022, and in our conversation about the role of Yurok language access and identity in his life he also mentioned his experience of his own high school history curricula.

In my history classes, I thought Native Americans were portrayed very poorly. You only learned the big things that happened to us—we were killed! Native Americans just don't have a good spectrum of information being told about them. One thing I noticed is that with teachers and students who cared, when we were able to be in those environments where people want to learn, we could do more. I remember we had a class where there were just two chapters about Native Americans for the whole year!

But Ms. D was my history teacher, and one memory I have is when she found out I was Native and taking the Yurok language class, she scheduled a whole half an hour for me to talk about the Yurok Natives. A lot of people assume all Native Americans live in tepees and wear certain clothing. Yuroks are a lot different from Blackfoot Indians; any tribe is different from the next. Ms. D was huge on that. She did not like the textbook but wanted to keep her teaching job, so she taught us what was in the book but also tried to do extra. (Alvarado 2022)

I also interviewed the second student to achieve the SSB in Yurok in 2019. Danielle Schunneman<sup>2</sup> is also a Yurok descendent who took all four years

<sup>1</sup> Maurice gave permission to use his real name.

<sup>2</sup> Danielle gave permission to use her real name.

of Yurok language, a course offered as a language elective at Eureka High School. Danielle observed:

My US history class covered mostly from WWI to WWII. We didn't really talk about Native Americans. We talked about wars and industrial revolutions, how we made our machines. I do remember talking about Columbus and thinking "ugh!" But our Yurok language teacher talked about contact with the Vikings and Yurok people. He said we [Yurok people] traded with them. They didn't slaughter us. That was interesting to see that facts he had about it were different than what I had heard always about Columbus and being killed. (Schunneman 2022)

While this book looks at Native American representation broadly, Maurice and Danielle give examples of how conscientious educators were able to facilitate inclusion of Yurok-specific content in the classroom. While in Maurice's example it put the burden on him to be the expert in front of his peers, his teacher was at least creating a space for Yurok visibility that was sorely lacking elsewhere.

Both of these alumni named their Yurok language class as the single most important educational intervention they had. It was a place where they were taught Yurok language, culture, history, and contemporary practices by a Yurok person. It was healing, formative, and impactful in how they viewed themselves then and the identities they took with them after they left school.

**Focus group results with Yurok students on Native Americans in education:** At Del Norte High School (DNHS), I conducted a mini-focus group with two Yurok language III–IV students who are both enrolled in the Yurok Tribe and live on the Yurok Indian Reservation in Klamath, California. When I asked them about representation of Native Americans they have encountered during their schooling, the stories came flooding out, with some exclamations accompanied by table-slapping with open palms. These two students are clearly friends and were comfortable finishing each other's sentences and showed strong emotion as they spoke.

#2: I got in an argument with a teacher once because they said something wrong and I was like "F\*\*k that about Columbus! That isn't right!" That was a few years ago.

# 1: At high school, the English teacher last year was talking about some things that were okay. But in history this year, the teacher kinda says some things that are iffy. I think she is more ignorant about it, not really racist.

#2: She posted something [online] that wasn't good, but I didn't say anything.

#1: Last year's history teacher did really want to be respectful. She got Columbus things right. But there is definitely still room to grow for her. She says some things that are not okay. The issue is that kids come into her class ...

#2: ... and then they go out in the world thinking that's all right to say stuff like that!

#1: Or they believe that [wrong] stuff! When you tell 'em what actually happened, they don't believe you. They say "that's not what my teacher said!" But confronting the teacher in front of class ...

#2: Saying, "I'm just trying to make sure you're getting your facts straight ..."

#1: ... they take it like you're trying to call them out!

#2: But they need to get their story right ...

#1: ... and not praise Christopher Columbus! (Focus Group 10.1 2022)

This is one excerpt from a sizable list of complaints about teachers at DNHS and the content they conveyed about Native people.

Both focus group participants commented on how significant the identity of teachers has been in relation to the class content and whether or not they feel understood in the classroom. Participant #1 noted: "In our elementary school, the majority of the teachers were Native. So, they knew the deal and taught us right. Here [at DNHS] our only Native teachers are for language and Native Studies" (Focus Group 10.1 2022).

Somewhat uniquely in the overall data set of student comments, participant #2 had experiences at two different high schools. The school where I met her, DNHS, is predominantly White and in a mostly White town with a reputation for racial hostility. The school she attended previously, HVHS, is on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, where the town and school are home and educator to a vast majority of Native Americans. She observes, "When I went to HVHS for a little while, I did so much better with grades and assignments up there, because teachers understood us and our learning styles. I had As and Bs there, but when I came back here, I got Ds and Fs. Teachers were so much more understanding and helpful there, and the students too" (Focus Group 10.1 2022). While recognizing that there were multiple intervening variables happening for participant #2 across her HVHS and DNHS experiences, the ability to study material that included Native content, in a Native-dominant environment, with teachers who understood her without her having to explain

it all, felt like it made a difference in her academic success. She explained further:

#2: Teachers there [HVHS] have kinda their own way of teaching. They talked about our culture and had us write about it. And they had more cultural classes up there.

#1: I think because most the teachers are Native there, or if they aren't, they're honorary Native ...

#2: ... Teachers there respect Natives. They actually really cared about us and put in the effort as well. We're a bit slower sometimes, some of us ....

#1: They probably felt like they could teach more about Native stuff because it was more Native. Here, we have all kinds, so someone will feel like, "why aren't you teaching about my group?" Kids will get defensive about it.

#2: And also, the teachers at Hoopa probably know your family. And teachers are elders, or in that [age] zone. So, people want to behave better.

#1: Right, a teacher can be like, "don't make me go tell your auntie. She's just in the next classroom!"

I asked the students what it would mean to them to have more Native teachers:

#2: I'd go to class more.

#1: I'd show up to class more!

#2: I'd be more comfortable in there. I'd get my work done more.

#1: Natives know better how Natives work. The majority of this school is White. There are a lot of Mexicans and a whole bunch of other ethnic groups. But Native kids learn differently. Some Native families be havin' it rough! Mom or dad can't find a job and they're barely making it through, but the kids still come to school. And they are trying to learn, but teachers don't know *how* they learn. It is easier to learn from someone that's Native or someone that at least knows how Native people are. (Focus Group 10.1 2022)

These students made three important points throughout the focus group. First, they want to have a more Native curriculum. It is interesting to them, they care about it, and it makes them want to participate. They are offended by misrepresentations of Native peoples in their classes, which happen frequently in subjects like US history.

Second, they see value in Native American teachers. There is a pipeline problem in education and credentialing that is closely linked to long-term legacies of settler colonialism. But it is a problem that can be systematically

addressed if it is prioritized and if resources are allocated to the training and recruitment of Native educators.

Third, they acknowledge culturally competent teaching as something that impacts how they feel about school. Teachers do not *have* to be Native in order to teach in ways that are most helpful for Native students, but they have to “know how Native people are” (Focus Group 10.1 2022). Students walk into the classroom with their own personal and cultural stories. Understanding that, even if one is not an expert in the stories themselves, can be demonstrated through a range of inclusive practices. This could mean ensuring the training in and the practice of trauma-informed pedagogy, which makes some alterations from traditional methods of teaching to help students dealing with high levels of trauma feel more comfortable.

For example, teachers could ask for volunteers rather than calling on students, or they could meet privately with students to discuss behavioral issues rather than publicly addressing them and shaming students in the process. These examples are all part of a trauma-informed toolkit. In one common example that came up across the schools, students mentioned being spoken to by teachers in front of their classmates after putting their heads down on their desks and closing their eyes. While admittedly such action might look like disrespect or boredom, in fact students talked about housing insecurity or high care-giving burdens that led to such exhaustion that they needed to rest. For students dealing with homelessness, school may be the one physically safe environment where they can do so.

More awareness of these realities, facilitated by increased training in these matters offered by schools and districts, can help foster increased sensitivity among educators and administrators. Such shifts in professional culture for teachers, alongside a deep evaluation of curricula to assess and address misrepresentation variation in teaching methods and assessments, can be meaningful for students. Standardized testing, for example, has long been shown to have a White bias, and yet it is still used in classrooms across the country (Au 2015: 23–32). When teachers expand the way they evaluate student achievement, they may find different results than one constrained testing model shows.

When it comes to issues pertaining to curriculum, I asked these two students what they think is working well in terms of accurate representation in the classroom at DNHS.

#2: Language classes are really good. I hear the Tolowa classes are great too. The language class teachers know the most about our heritage. They know all our ancestors' stories, so they get it right. Most history teachers are White and not getting it right. Even having guest speakers from local Native populations would be an improvement. I think a history class should have guest speakers come in before they teach anything about Native American heritage, and then after that, teachers should go into their lesson plans and see what they got wrong before they teach. People would be willing to come in and speak. (Focus Group 10.1 2022)

Though they are using different language to describe it, these students are speaking to the fact that they do not want to be taught inaccurate, colonial-derived information. They want educators to be more active in seeking out ways to provide accurate representation, which may directly contradict the information they had previously prepared in their lesson plans. This levelheaded call by these young, bright teenagers should be an incentive to educators everywhere to start thinking more creatively about how to provide accurate information that respects Native cultures.

### MEXICO IN THE CURRICULUM

Across the hall from the Yurok language classroom at EHS, where I spent many intensive hours with students and the teachers from 2018 to 2022, is the Advanced Placement Spanish class. Further down the halls, lined with red and green metal lockers, is the English Language Development Support class. I've spent time ethnographically observing these classes and conducted interviews and focus groups with students. One student, Dana,<sup>3</sup> is in both classes, as she is a native Spanish-speaker working to get her English up to a level that will let her pass the classes she needs in order to graduate. Dana was born in California, but accompanied her mother when she needed to return to Mexico, and did the majority of her schooling there. She has only studied for a few years in the US, and she has been alarmed at the stereotypes of Mexicans that she sees in the curriculum:

Sometimes Mexicans are shown as hard-working in the books, like in history. But frequently, Mexicans are shown as bad, as invading the country [US] and abandoning theirs. But it isn't true. It is complicated why people leave [Mexico]. It isn't that they want to come. They come because there is

<sup>3</sup>A pseudonym.

something they need that they can't get where they are: safety, a job that will let them live. (Anonymous 2022a)

Dana is very clear that the curricula she sees paint Mexican people in a negative light, and she hangs her head when I ask how it makes her feel about herself. Our interview is in Spanish. “*Malo,*” she says, “bad.” “Obviously I know the real reasons people come, but it still makes me feel like I and my family have done something wrong” (Anonymous 2022a).

Stories like Dana’s demand real-world change. The problems of representation in textbooks are not hypothetical. Students are affected by them. Education policy-makers, administrators, educators, and staff at high schools can learn from students’ perspectives and suggestions, as can the rest of us community members. Young people provide insights for how adults in their communities can better support them at school. Taken together, such lessons can help us remake the world into a place where all are welcome as their whole selves.

**“A bit more representation”**: Carl<sup>4</sup> is Dana’s classmate in Advanced Placement Spanish, and he is bilingual, having grown up in Eureka his entire life with parents from Mexico. He is outgoing, gangly, prone to laughter and to play things down. He wants to be accepted, but he doesn’t want to complain. Whereas Dana radiates a calm intensity that demonstrates a character that is always watching and taking things in, Carl appears to float through his days, bounding from situation to situation. He is much more caught off-guard by the interview questions, which he reacts to as if this is the first time he has thought about these issues. He doesn’t have the language to describe what he sees, and he fumbles his way through our exchange. I edited out many of the pauses in his answers to make it more fluid reading, but there was a lot of rephrasing questions and defining terms in our conversation.

Carl is enrolled in US history during the 2021–2022 academic year when I interview him, so I ask him about that class. He tells me about representations of Mexican people, and people from other minority backgrounds, that he has read, watched, or discussed in his history curricula.

I feel like in history it [misrepresentation] happens a lot. They change up, not the story, but, like, the way it’s interpreted, to try and make one side

<sup>4</sup>A pseudonym.



seem better than the other. I'm trying to think of an example right now ... like how California become the US and not Mexico.

In Spanish class we definitely talk about immigration. We have the, uh, the little podcasts that we're playing right now. We're listening to a story that's on, like, this person that works as one of the people that helps others get across the border, and they get paid for doing that. That's the only class we talk about stuff like that in. In the other classes, like in history, we learn about how like, in the 1800s all the Europeans and also all the Asians came here.

I feel, like, there should be a bit more representation, I mean just all of the immigrants in general, not just Mexicans. But I feel like they do a decent job, 'cause, like, they go over how the Europeans, like, came from that side, and how the Japanese and some Chinese, they all come from different areas, but they also talk about how they got discriminated, and how some people in those groups have stood up for it [against discrimination]. It's so-so.

This balanced approach shows that Carl is able to recognize the importance of multiple perspectives and stories about many identities. However, it is telling that only in his Spanish class, taught by a particularly engaged teacher, does he hear about immigration as it pertains to his own family's experience. Carl goes on to emphasize the importance of getting to read about Mexican im/migrant identity in another class.

In AP English and composition, uh, we were doing a unit on the American dream, and the teacher let us pick from five or six books. One was from, uh, Mexicans, that was the one that I chose—me and my other friend—and there was another one with just Asians, but I forgot what type, and there were a few others from different cultures. The one I read was called, uh, *The Distance Between Us*. I like how, since it was about the American dream, it's not just, like, one American dream, but the American dream of Mexicans, and Asians, and everyone else. It was an interesting unit. And we also did presentations, like each person did different books, and it was fun seeing the different views from these different cultures. (Anonymous 2022b)

This excerpt speaks to the importance of culturally relevant curricula. Carl felt affirmed in reading about stories that resonated with his own, but he later noted that they were few and far between and he wished he had more. For diverse schools, creating curricula like the book selection that can be a choose-your-own-adventure approach, rather than one book for

everyone, is a strategic way to meet the interests of a multifaceted demographic.

I recognize that textbook reform is not a top priority for many of the students I spoke with in focus group interviews. Yet reading between the lines, themes of representation and identity are present in the excerpt below, where I ask a focus group of three Eureka High School Advanced Placement Spanish students (#1 and #2 are Mexican American and #3 is White) to imagine that they had a magic wand and could wish for anything.

#1: If I could wish for something it would probably be to make the world, like, love each other more, because with that everything else will fall into place. And I would wish for more money, 'cause like, my parents don't have that much. We as a family don't have enough to just be comfortable. I'd wish for better jobs so we can earn a little more just to be, like, more stable than we are today.

#2: For me, if I had a couple magic wishes I'd try to change like, discrimination and stigmas. And make it so students can go to college easier. Like, put systems in place that actually give students money to go to college. And I'd ask for a road to citizenship, because I know that my parents can't reap all the benefits that provides, even though they pay taxes and all that. They don't have social security, they can't retire later in life, just because they're immigrants.

#3: Well, of course, not to show off my geek side, but I would like to have a phantasmal world where there's, like, dragons and magic! But more realistically, I would like the world to be more unified, like, instead of trying to fight with each other, just trying to solve the world's problems. I also did like that free education idea! A lot of people are kinda held back by their level of education. Like, most of us aren't able to go to college because we can't pay for it, because our parents don't have a good enough education to help us out. So I'd wish for a chance to actually achieve our goals and dreams, to go out and help our community and our country, to help benefit society. (Focus Group 2.2 2022)

Representation in educational textbooks is one small part of a much larger puzzle about youth wellbeing. Other pressing concerns—economic stability, social discrimination, educational access, immigration reform—weigh on these students. These concerns translate into emotional baggage young people carry into the classroom with them every day. It is with them at their desks as they bend over their textbooks, and it is with them when they go home at the end of each day homework assignments in

hand. As a society, we have minimal control over what awaits people in their homes, but schools are the purview of the state. There, these students can find stories that are sensitive to their identities and that reflect them and include them. Or not.

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