

# NO ME VEO: A LACK OF HISPANIC RACIAL REPRESENTATION IN THE TEXAS BLUEBONNET AWARD BOOKS

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to identify the extent to which the characters in the books on the 2020-2021 Texas Bluebonnet Award Master List (TBAML) reflect the diversity of Texas students in grades 3-6 in terms of race. The researchers used content analysis to collect demographic data about the main characters in the books on the 2020-2021 TBAML. The researchers collected data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) concerning the racial demographics of Texas students in grades 3-6, who are the readers of the books on the TBAML. The researchers compared the data collected from the books to the data collected from TEA in order to determine whether the racial diversity of the targeted readers was represented by the main characters on the TBAML. The researchers then compared the 2020-2021 data to a previous study entitled, Exploring diversity representation in literature for children: A content analysis of the 2015-2016 Texas Bluebonnet Award Master List (Lee, 2017).*

Keywords: Texas Bluebonnet Awards, children's literature, content analysis, racial diversity, main characters

## Introduction

The Texas Bluebonnet Award (TBA) was established in 1979 and is sponsored by the Texas Association of School Librarians (TASL) and the Children's Round Table (CRT) of the Texas Library Association (TLA). The mission of the TBA program is to promote reading by children in grades 3-6 with the goals of introducing children to a variety of quality books, thereby helping them develop critical reading skills while honoring and encouraging imaginative authors (TBA Policy and Procedures, 2017).

A Texas Bluebonnet Selection Committee is responsible for selecting the books eligible for the TBAML. The process for identifying books for inclusion on the TBAML considers books recommended by school and public librarians, teachers, parents, students, and any other interested parties. After receiving nominations, the TBA selection committee reads and discusses the nominated books and then selects 20 titles based on two initial criteria. The first criteria states that the author must be a living citizen of the United States or someone who currently resides and publishes in the United States (or has done so in the past). The second criteria states that the titles must have been published within the three years prior to the TBAML release date. The committee also considers student interests, content, any prior journal reviews, and the literary quality of the books. The committee then decides which books will be on the TBAML. After the books on the TBAML are distributed to participating schools, students vote on their favorite book (TBA Policy and Procedures, 2017).

In this content analysis, the researchers examined the TBAML in order to determine the extent to which the racial demographics of the main characters of the chosen books reflect the racial demographics of the readers of the TBAML, which is composed of a majority of Hispanic students. This study also includes a brief comparison of the current study and a portion of a study from 2015-2016 entitled, *Exploring diversity representation in literature for children: A content analysis of the 2015-2016 Texas Bluebonnet Award Master List* (Lee, 2017). This research is significant because studies show that readers from racial or ethnic minority groups who are also English Language Learners and come from low-income backgrounds are more vulnerable to reading difficulties and underrepresentation (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010). This study also addresses how award lists such as the TBAML should be increasingly inclusive of literature that represents non-White student demographic groups.

The Nation's Report Card (2022) states that 64% of 4th grade students classified as English Language Learners or Emergent Bilinguals, performed below the basic reading achievement level. Forty percent of 4th graders who were eligible for the National School Lunch Program did not meet the basic reading level. More engaged readers statistically exhibit a higher level of reading ability and their growth as readers is positively correlated with their engagement and overall reading success. Therefore, supplying student readers with literature reflective of who they are is important. When readers are able to see themselves in the literature they read, they are more engaged and feel more connected to their school community. Fisher et al. (2014) argued that multiethnic literature has a dual significance, highlighting that minority children often have a higher sense of self-worth after reading such literature. Other researchers have reported on the correlation between reading success and student representation in literature (e.g., Lee & Anderson, 2014; Abacioglu, Volman, & Fischer, 2020). Harris (1992) states, "I became convinced that the literacy achievement of African-American children would improve if they could see themselves in the books they read. I still hold firmly to that belief" (p.

xvi). This sentiment expresses the importance of developing students' cultural competency and understanding in order to optimize their learning experience. Similarly, representation in literature is crucial for Hispanic students, as they constitute a significant proportion of the student population in Texas. It is therefore essential to select literature that is culturally sensitive and inclusive to promote diversity and equity in education for all students. According to research, students from diverse backgrounds who have access to culturally responsive literature have been shown to have a more positive reading experience and improved academic outcomes (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Gay, 2010).

The United States is a country founded by immigrants (Cowan & Taxel, 2011) and still comprised of a vastly immigrant population. According to the 1950 census, the population of the United States was 85.4% non-Hispanic White and 3.2% Hispanic, 10.5% Black, .3% Native American, and .5% Asian. The demographics of the United States' population in 2018 were 60.22% non-Hispanic White, 11.97% Hispanic, 12.72% Black, 5.63% Asian, and the remaining percent was made up of American Indian, Native Hawaiian, and people of more than one race. According to Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, & Krogstad (2020), the Hispanic population reached nearly 61 million in the United States in 2019. That is up from 9.6 million in 1970. The population of the United States has increased by a large amount during the course of the last decade, showing an increase of 18.9 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This growth is mostly attributed to the Hispanic population, who accounted for more than half (52%) of this increase, according to a Pew Research Center analysis (Krogstad, 2020). The composition of American classrooms has changed substantially as a result of this demographic upheaval, which has far-reaching consequences for the country's educational system. The student population is today more diversified than ever before in terms of their backgrounds, experiences, and educational expectations (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). This demographic transition is most noticeable in states that share a border with Mexico, such as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, according to research (Ramsey, 2015). This is because there is a disproportionately large number of students of Hispanic heritage in these states. The major demographic changes that have occurred as a result of the rapid increase of the Hispanic population across the United States is particularly noticeable in states like Texas (Olguin-Phillips, 2021).

The shared border between Texas and Mexico has had a significant impact on the racial demographics of Texas public school students, resulting in a high proportion of Hispanic students (Miller, 2003). According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), more than 50% of students in grades 3-6 are Hispanic. In addition, Texas schools have become much more diverse in recent years, with the number of Hispanic pupils increasing by 6.1% and the number of White students declining by 7.6% between 2006 and 2016. In order for the Texas education system to properly serve its student population, it is vital that school literature represent the range of student backgrounds, particularly in terms of the state's racial demographic composition. According to Lee (2017), "To assimilate various people into our public education system, all pupils must be able to connect to the curriculum and the instruments used to teach it, such as the books they read in school" (p. 195). Culturally responsive literature that reflects the diversity of the student population has been found to improve academic achievement, increase student engagement, and foster self-esteem and cultural identification (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Gay, 2010). Therefore, educators and policymakers must take into account the particular needs and experiences of these students in order to achieve educational justice and success. Gay (2010) asserts that culturally responsive teaching is an effective strategy for meeting the requirements of a diverse student population, which involves providing students with access to

culturally relevant literature and materials.

Research has proven that it is imperative for children to see oneself- one's history, culture, and experiences in the books they read. "Seeing people from different backgrounds in children's books should be the norm, not the exception" (Koss, 2015, p. 39). As the student population in American classrooms becomes increasingly diverse, it is essential that the literature used as a teaching tool reflects this diversity in order to serve all students effectively. Research has also shown that multiethnic literature can play a powerful role in promoting self-worth and mutual appreciation among people of different backgrounds (Fisher, Reynolds, Hsu, Barnes, & Tyler, 2014). Furthermore, it can foster mutual appreciation among people of different backgrounds, promoting understanding and empathy towards other cultures and experiences. According to Steiner, Nash, & Chase (2008), multicultural literature is a powerful tool for teaching empathy because it helps children to understand and appreciate the experiences of people who are different from themselves. Minority children had a higher sense of self- worth after reading multiethnic literature. It also fosters mutual appreciation amongst people of different backgrounds. According to Bishop (1990):

It is true, of course, that good literature reaches across cultural and ethnic borders to touch us all as humans...however, for those children who historically had been ignored – or worse, ridiculed – in children's books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as realistically human was essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up... My assessment was that historically, children from parallel cultures had been offered mainly books as windows into lives that were different from their own, and children from the dominant culture had been offered mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives. All children need both. (p. ix-xi)

It is important to note that representation in literature is not only about including characters from diverse backgrounds, but also about the way these characters are represented and the stories that are told about them. As Ladson-Billings (1994) states, "It is not enough to simply have diverse books available; the way in which diverse students are portrayed in literature is also critical" (p. 465). Therefore, it is important to critically examine literature for its representation of diverse groups in order to ensure that it is promoting positive, accurate and inclusive narratives. Historically the majority of children's novels have predominantly featured white, upper-middle-class, able-bodied, English-speaking, and male characters (Feagin, 2016). Books such as *Charlotte's Web* in which the main character is representative of a white, middle-class girl living on a farm in a small country town, in a two parent home, may have represented the majority of students with whom it was shared in the classroom 70 years ago, but would not be wholistically representative in today's classroom (Fisher et al., 2014). Considering that the world depicted in children's books has been historically overwhelmingly White (Feagan, 2016), the depiction of many identities and experiences in children's literature is critical for creating a more inclusive and equitable school atmosphere (Ladson- Billings, 1994). The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison annually reports on the number of multicultural titles in print, and their findings indicate that the representation of diverse identities in children's literature remains low (Cai, 2002). Horning discovered that just 7.9% of 3,400 titles were about African-Americans, 1.2% were about Asian-Pacific Americans, 3.3% were about U.S.

Hispanics and Latinos, and 2.4% were about Native Americans. This lack of representation is especially troubling in modern classrooms, as student demographics are becoming increasingly varied (Ramsey, 2015; Olguin-Phillips, 2021). Further, there is significance in including all types of diversity in books, including, but not limited to race and people of color (Feagin, 2016). They should also include non-heterosexuals, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities (We Need Diverse Books, 2015).

From this study, the conclusion can be drawn that more Hispanic representation is needed in the TBAML and in all literature for children. Despite the expanding Hispanic/Latino population in the United States, the literature presented to these students does not appropriately reflect their culture and experiences (Galda et al., 2013; Musu-Gillette, McFarland, Kewalramani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016). Children benefit from seeing themselves mirrored in the novels they read, since it fosters a sense of self-worth and mutual understanding amongst diverse groups (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2013; Koss, 2015). Those who support the growth of diversity representation in literature for children and seek to influence change should “interrogate the power structures that discriminate against certain groups and privilege others. Beyond this, as a society, we must confront race, class, and gender relations, the impact of history, and other social issues” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 9). Through literature, students can see how their cultures contribute to society and gain a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging begins in schools, namely, in the literature to which children are exposed, and carries over into the adult lives of students, as they come to comprehend their roles as members of society and their place in the world.

## Materials

In order to complete this content analysis, the researcher purchased the 20 books nominated for the 2020-2021 TBAML. Below is the 2020-2021 TBAML in alphabetical order organized by the author’s last name.

Auxier, J. (2018) Sweep: The Story of a Girl and Her Monster. Puffin Canada.

Blakemore, M. F. (2019) Frankie Sparks & the Class Pet. Aladdin.

Barton, C. (2018) What Do You Do With a Voice Like That? The Story of Extraordinary Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. Beach Lane Books.

Bowels, D. (2018) They Call Me Güero: A Border Kids Poems. Kokila.

Brown, D. (2019) Rocket to the Moon (Big Ideas that Changed the World). Abrams Fanfare.

Calejo, R. (2018) Charlie Hernandez and the League of Shadows. Aladdin.

Craft, J. (2019) New Kid. Quill Tree Books.

Dekeyser, S. (2018) The Rhino in Left Field. Margaret K. McElderry Books.

- Haddix, M. P. (2019) Greystone Secrets #1: The Strangers. Katherine Tegen Books.
- Lenz, N. (2019) Bernice Buttman, Model Citizen. Random House.
- McDunn, G. (2019) Caterpillar Summer. Bloomsbury Children's Books.
- Miller, R. (2019) No More Poems! A Book in Verse that Just Gets Worse. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Parry, R. (2019) A Wolf Called Wonder. Greenwillow Books.
- Pinkney, J. (2019) A Place to Land: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Speech that Inspired a Nation. Neal Porter Books.
- Pyron, B. (2019) Stay. Katherine Tegen Books.
- Sichol, L. B. (2019) From an Idea to Disney: How Imagination Built a World of Magic. Clarion Books.
- Stone, T. L. (2018) Pass Go and Collect \$200: The Real Story of How Monopoly Was Invented. Henry Holt & Co.
- White, J. A. (2018) Nightbooks. Katherine Tegen Books.
- Van Dusen, C. (2019) If I Built a School. Rocky Pond Books.
- Venkatraman P. (2019) The Bridge Home. Nancy Paulsen Books.

## Methodology

This content analysis is a five-year follow-up study of a portion of the dissertation entitled, *Exploring diversity representation in literature for children: A content analysis of the 2015-2016 Texas Bluebonnet Award Master List* (Lee, 2017) which reported on the racial representation of characters on the 2015-2016 TBAML. The 2016 study revealed that the characters in the Texas Bluebonnet Award Books did not proportionally represent the readers of those books. Hispanic students, which represented the largest racial category of students enrolled in 3rd through 6th grades in Texas schools during the 2015-2016 school year (834,745 or 52.5%), were grossly underrepresented with only 8.7% of the main characters being Hispanic. According to TEA (2022), during the 2020-2021 school year, Hispanic students in grades 3-6 made up 827,081 or 52.5% of the total student population in Texas, the same percentage as in the previous study (Lee, 2017). The present study is designed to compare the category of racial representation of the main characters on the 2020-2021 TBAML with the

racial makeup of students enrolled in grades 3-6 during the 2020-2021 school year to see if the characters in the selected books more accurately match the racial diversity in Texas schools in present day.

To ensure the accuracy of the data collected for this study, the researchers took a systematic approach in determining the socio-demographic characteristics of the main characters from the books selected on the TBAML. The researchers determined the total number of main characters that would be used from the 20 books on the TBAML for the data calculations. Of the 20 books, 18 of them had one main character. There were two books where the main character was classified as undetermined. These books included *No More Poems! A Book in Verse that Just Gets Worse* by Rhett Miller. This is a book of poems that included representations of multiple races, however, one main character for the book could not be determined. Further, the book entitled, *A Wolf Called Wonder* by Rosanne Parry included a wolf as the main character, therefore, race could not be applied. These two books were eliminated from all calculations because the information concerning the characters presented in the book was found to skew the set of data collected from the books. After determining the total number of main characters, the researchers determined the race of each of the main characters using details provided within the text of the book.

Next, the researchers compared the data with the corresponding data percentages calculated using reports released by the TEA. The total number of Texas students in grades 3-6 was used to calculate percentages from TEA Public Information Record (PIR, 2020-2021) reports. For example, there were a total of 1,576,505 students in grades 3-6 during the 2020-2021 school year. Among them, 827,081 students in grades 3-6 were Hispanic, which is 52.46% of the total population of students, a number totaling more than half of the population. In order to derive a percentage that could be compared to the data percentages calculated for the main characters on the TBAML, the researchers calculated the percentage of main characters found to be Hispanic out of the 18 books. For example, since 2 of the 18 characters in the books were identified as Hispanic, the percentage of Hispanic representation was found to be 11.11%. This process of comparing percentages from the data sets was repeated for each subdivision of the seven racial categories included on the TEA PIR report. These percentages conveyed the extent to which diversity representation, according to race, was present in the books on the 2020-2021 TBAML, and how well that representation mirrored the demographics of the readers of the books.

## Results

According to TEA, during the 2020-2021 school year, Hispanic students made up 52.46% of the total student population in grades 3-6. The findings of this study show a need for more Hispanic representation among the main characters in the literature accessible to Texas students, particularly those in grades 3-6, who are the readers of the TBAML.

Data was collected from the 2020-2021 Texas Bluebonnet Award Books concerning the race of the main characters in the books. In the 2020-2021 PIR released by the TEA entitled “Enrollment by Grade and Race/Ethnicity” race was organized into seven categories including African-American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, White, or Multiracial. Table 1 illustrates a comparison of the racial makeup of the main characters in the books to the racial makeup of Texas students in grades 3-6.

**Table 1.**

*Racial Makeup of Texas Students in Grades 3-6 During the 2020-2021 School Year  
Compared to the Racial Makeup of the Main Characters in the 2020-2021 TBAML*

	African Am.	Am. Indian	Asian	Hisp.	Pacific Islander	White	Multi - racial	Total
Grades 3-6	12.68%	0.39%	4.85%	52.46%	.16%	26.68%	2.78%	100%
Main Characters 2020-2021	22.22%	0.00%	5.55%	11.11%	0.0%	55.55%	5.55%	100%

**Table 2.**

*Racial Makeup of Texas Students in Grades 3-6 During the 2015-2016 School Year  
Compared to the Racial Makeup of the Main Characters in the 2015-16 TBAML*

	African Am.	Am. Indian	Asian	Hisp.	Pacific Islander	White	Multi - racial	Total
Grades 3-6	12.5%	.4%	4.1%	52.5%	0.1%	28.4%	2.1%	100%
Main Characters 2015-2016	4.3%	0.0%	4.3%	8.7%	0.0%	78.3%	4.3%	100%

During the 2020- 2021 school year, Texas students in grades 3-6 were found to be 12.68% African-American, 0.39% American Indian, .85% Asian, 52.46% Hispanic,

0.16% Pacific Islander, 26.68% White, and 2.78% Multi-racial. Of the main characters in the books on the TBAML, (22.22%) of the main characters were African American, Asian, or Multi-racial. Further, (11.11%) of the main characters were Hispanic, and (55.55%) were White. No Pacific Islander or American Indian characters were represented.

During the 2015-2016 school year, Texas students in grades 3-6 were found to be 12.5% African American, 0.4% American Indian, 4.1% Asian, 52.2% Hispanic, 0.1% Pacific Islander, 28.4% White, and 2.1% Multi-racial. Of the main characters in the books on the TBAML, one out of twenty-three (4.3%) of the main characters was African American, Asian, or Multi-racial. Further, two out of twenty-three (8.7%) of the main characters were Hispanic, and eighteen out of twenty-three (78.3%) were White. No Pacific Islander or American Indian characters were represented.

Accordingly, this study showed that the main characters in the books on the TBAML underrepresented the Hispanic demographic population by 43.8%, the African- American



demographic population by 8.2%, the American Indian demographic population by .4%, and the Pacific Islander or American Indian demographic population by .1%. Further, the main characters in the books on the TBAML overrepresented the White demographic population by 49.9%, which is almost three times as much, and doubled the multi-racial demographic with an overrepresentation of 2.2%. The Asian demographic population was about equally represented with a difference in representation of only 0.1%. Finally, the difference between Hispanic representation in 2015-2016 and 2020-2021 was 8.7% and 11.11%, respectively, and in both years the Hispanic student population of students in grades 3-6 was over half of the student population.

## Discussion

Literature that is provided to students in schools ultimately sets a solid foundation for how students see themselves as part of society. Texas classrooms now represent more racial diversity than has ever before ever existed in the history of the state.

Therefore, literature such as the Texas Bluebonnet Award books should represent this growing racial diversity. Literature must be a teaching tool that weaves a common bond so that all students feel included as they progress through the Texas school system.

At 52.5%, more than half the students in grades 3-6 are Hispanic while only 8.7% of the characters in the Texas Bluebonnet Award books are Hispanic, a percentage that has remained stagnant since the 2015-2016 study. Conversely, 78.3% of the characters in the TBA books are White, while only 28.4% of students in these grades make up that racial demographic. The disproportionate representation of White characters and a lack of representation of other races has been documented for decades. Barry (1998) raised important questions regarding cultural representation in children and young adult's literature, including the consequences and reasons for this underrepresentation and potential solutions. "Given that there is poor representation of Hispanics in children's and young adult (YA) literature, what are the true ramifications? How exactly does this situation affect our students? What are the reasons for this poor representation? What can be done about it?". The answers to these questions asked 25 years ago lie not only in adding literature representative of the student population in classroom libraries and using it to teach lessons, it also lies in making sure it makes award list nominations such as the TBAML.

There are numerous strategies to ensure that the literature chosen for the TBAML include books that are inclusive and culturally sensitive to the large population of Hispanic students in Texas schools. As this research outlines and mostly notably, the selection committee can search for literature with Hispanic characters and themes.

However, inclusion may also mean that the selection committee seeks out works authored by Hispanic writers. Additionally, the selection committee can search for novels released by publishing houses controlled by Hispanics. It is also essential to consider the subject matter of the chosen books, particularly with respect to the titles having positive depictions of Hispanic culture and people. The committee may also search for works that address pertinent Hispanic community concerns, such as immigration, prejudice, poverty, and the different experiences and opinions of Hispanic people. Choosing a higher percentage of books of this nature for the TBAML will result in a more inclusive and culturally sensitive literary environment for a majority of students in Texas schools who are the readers of the TBAML, and who are also

Hispanic. In a state that shares a border with Mexico, Hispanic representation in literature presented to students in school is a necessity and should be a top priority for those involved with choosing books for the TBAML which in turn, are used to educate Texas students.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome. No funding was received for this work.

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## About the Author(s):



Dr. Elizabeth Lee is a professor and researcher in the field of Early Childhood Education. Her body of work is focused on exploring the use of creativity to foster hands-on learning and divergent thinking in young children. Her teaching, research, and presentations also incorporate a focus on diversity representation in the early childhood classroom, particularly in children's literature. She is currently serving as a professor at Lone Star College.



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Dr. Francisco Usero González is a recognized expert in linguistics, literacy development, and bilingual education, currently serving as an assistant professor in the Bilingual Education and ESL program at Sam Houston State University. With extensive national and international teaching experience, his work focuses on the intersections of learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and bilingual education, emphasizing culturally and linguistically responsive approaches.

Dr. Usero González collaborates with institutions like UCSF's Multitudes Lab, contributing to the development of a Spanish dyslexia program recently approved by the state of California. Through research, conference presentations, and publications, he advocates for inclusive educational practices that support Hispanic bilingual students and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity. His contributions to biliteracy program design and instructional innovation continue to shape the evolving field of bilingual education, positioning him as a leading voice in promoting equity and excellence in multilingual classrooms.