

# Reading Partners Book Selection

## Guiding principles for selecting books for inclusion to the curriculum

Research in the Science of Reading shows that learning to read is not natural and is an ongoing process. This ongoing process is more difficult when students feel discouraged by or uninterested in the books they read. Reading Partners is committed to ensuring students have books that celebrate their identities, enforce their learning opportunities, and inspire them as readers.

Dr. Sims Bishop, a leader in multicultural representation in children's literature, was the first to introduce the idea of mirrors, windows, and sliding doors, which Reading Partners adopts in our book selection process. Books are an opportunity for students to see themselves positively reflected when reading (the mirrors). Inclusion and representation are important; our book lists are curated so that the multitude of young readers with identities known or unknown, visible or invisible, can find themselves and see that reading is meant for them. We firmly believe that books have the opportunity to open eyes to unknown worlds (the windows) and invite readers to join characters and the authors in the stories (the sliding doors).

Throughout a student's journey in Reading Partners, the books they encounter will allow them to connect with characters who look like them and who share experiences with them. And when students are not directly connected with a character, they will have the opportunity to learn about others and better understand experiences beyond their own.

Reading Partners selects each book with students in mind. It is the role of tutors working with students in Reading Partners to support students' journeys as they decode, challenge their comprehension, and step through the sliding door together to explore unknown worlds or revisit recognized stories with a new perspective or voice.

Below, you will find a brief description of Reading Partners current guiding principles around curriculum book selection.

### Skill Alignment

Each Reading Partners lesson is directly aligned to a specific literacy skill. From pre-reading skills to advanced comprehension and everything in between, students work with their tutors to build the skills needed to be successful readers. Isolated skill practice with the support of a tutor is one part of the lesson. Practicing the skill in connected text is equally important. **Each lesson contains a book or text specifically chosen to highlight**

**the skill of the day and allow students to practice that skill in an authentic reading environment.**

## Text Level and Complexity

Reading skills build on each other. **As such, texts become increasingly more complex and advanced as students learn and master more skills.** In earlier levels of our curriculum, students and tutors build skills, and the books grow in complexity as they move through the curriculum's scope and sequence. As students move through our Emerging and Beginning Readers curriculum levels, they will work across a spectrum of levels that is linear. To maximize their growth at the Advancing Readers curriculum levels, students flow from independent reading level, instructional level, and frustration level and back; students who are not yet reading on grade level will make greater gains when being encouraged in this way.

## Look for Stereotypes in Representation

In selecting texts, Reading Partners is **highly sensitive to the stereotypes that can show up in children's literature and actively avoids including these types of books in our curriculum.** For example, Reading Partners' curriculum contains a wealth of wonderful books about Black figures in sports, civil rights, and music. And, it includes stories about Black artists, explorers, and astronauts. We want students to read about well known historical figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, and Jackie Robinson, *and* we want to introduce them to lesser known historical figures like Jacob Lawrence, Garrett Morgan, and Bessie Coleman.

When selecting books, Reading Partners ensures that representation is a celebration of culture, identity, and experiences—and that a character's struggle does not define their existence in the story. Authors create vibrant worlds for readers, and our books should allow students to feel connected, proud and inspired when they see themselves represented.

## Pay Attention to the Collective Message

When selecting texts for the curriculum, Reading Partners acknowledges the danger of a single story. **We select diverse stories for our curriculum that reflect the varied and vibrant cultures of our students, providing multiple opportunities for students to be part of shared experiences, learn from new experiences and perspectives, and connect with texts in meaningful ways.** The more stories we provide with diverse representation the more opportunities students have to see themselves in the books that they read.

There is a longstanding history of publishers excluding Black and Brown characters in stories or limiting their stories to a single narrative. For generations, the majority of

children's books have included proportionately more white characters in a variety of contexts and roles. This has allowed white students to see themselves as individuals, with unlimited opportunity and potential. Black and Brown students, on the other hand, have been intentionally excluded from texts and the limited, representative texts that exist have been excluded from schools. This has negatively impacted how Black and Brown students view themselves as individuals and as readers. At Reading Partners, we're committed to elevating diverse texts so that all of the students in our programs feel seen, valued, and heard.

## Reflect on Underlying Themes

**We are not interested in performative (visual) representation; we take a holistic approach when choosing diverse texts, seeking out texts with strong, affirming messages that will leave readers with an authentic experience.** When selecting titles, Reading Partners only considers books that fully honor a character's experience and exclude books that may negatively impact how a student who identifies with these characters may perceive the story.

For example, take a seemingly innocent story featuring a recent non-English speaking immigrant to the United States who, along with his teenage grandson, makes a major mistake in a gardening job due to a language barrier and his grandson's inexperience. The white man who hired them helps them avoid disaster because he recognizes their moral fortitude. We must consider several aspects: Does this story reinforce a white savior theme that focuses on the white person's action, thereby unintentionally belittling or undermining the other characters' actions or intelligence? How will our language learning students feel if that was their only mirror in the reading center? What ideas would non-immigrant students take from this single story? Reading Partners examines stories through multiple lenses and considers the message that will be received through the characters, conflicts, and resolutions throughout a story.

## Consider Authors, Illustrators, and Authenticity

**We consider who has written and illustrated the books in our curriculum.** The "Own Voices" movement highlights an important factor in the efforts toward greater diversity in children's literature: it's not just what is being represented, but by whom.

This does not mean that authors should write only about their own lived experiences. That undermines the creative spirit and limits every artist. However, it does mean that when Reading Partners is considering a book featuring a protagonist or character from a marginalized group, and the author is not a part of that group, we must take a closer look: did the writer do their research and make it clear that they did so? Does this book in our

curriculum take space from another book on the same topic written by someone who may bring more authenticity to the story?

## Don't Overlook Visual Representation

**Reading Partners pays close attention to visual representation, particularly in nonfiction.** For example, do the books on transportation that show modern modes of travel (airplanes, fast trains, cars) in western European or US locations and only present bikes, carts, rickety buses, and rowboats in countries with predominantly people of color? Or are there books about music that always show an Asian American girl playing a violin, a Black man with a horn, and a white man conducting an orchestra (leading)? Such images flatten the stories of these people and reinforce stereotypes, limiting our students' understanding of the world and, ultimately, their place in it.

We have a responsibility to students and tutors to bring a well-rounded and honest portal into the world that shows a variety of thriving communities, cultures, and experiences.

## Make the Work Visible

As Reading Partners continues to evaluate the books in our curriculum, we must **make our work visible and share what we are doing and why**. As part of our commitment to REDI, staff and AmeriCorps members should feel empowered and confident to articulate why the diversity of literature in our curriculum matters, what role it plays in supporting literacy and how tutors and students can thoughtfully and successfully navigate diverse texts.

## Routine Examination

In addition to the guiding principles outlined in this resource, Reading Partners continuously takes note of and updates our [diverse text matrix](#) so that we have an inventory of texts, characters, and authors represented in our curriculum. **To do this work well, we look for gaps in representation in our curriculum on an ongoing basis.** The diverse text matrix examines own voice author representation, along with the character's race, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQIA+ representation, and other marginalized group identities and if these identities drive the conflict. This ongoing process allows Reading Partners to honestly assess and continuously improve our curriculum and the experience of students in our programs. Being honest with ourselves where there are gaps pushes us to do better for students and holds us accountable to continuous improvement. All staff are welcome and encouraged to [make recommendations here](#) so that as books are added to our curriculum, your ideas can be incorporated.