

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW NOW



A report from

KGL

KnowledgeWorks
Global Ltd.

CJK GROUP

Updated Edition

TABLE OF CONTENTS

04 WHAT IS CDEI?

05 CDEI AND EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

06 WHY DOES CDEI MATTER?

07 NOT EVERYONE IS PRO-CDEI

08 HOW TO FOCUS ON CDEI

09 CHALLENGES

10 GETTING IT WRONG

10 REAPING THE REWARDS

10 SUMMARY

ABOUT US

KGL

KnowledgeWorks
Global Ltd.

CJK GROUP

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KGL is a global content solutions developer and a member of the CJK Group. We offer industry-leading, end-to-end content and learning product development services aimed at learners of all ages and used in a broad range of markets around the world. These include PreK–12, higher education, professional development, English Learning, professional and technical journals, academic and scholarly materials, and vocational learning, among others.



What is CDEI?

During the last decade, the publishing industry has stepped up its efforts to become more inclusive and diverse—a change that has gradually manifested through educational materials that are more broadly representative of the cultures and experiences of an increasingly diverse US student body.

Ongoing social justice activism has spurred ever-greater public attention on educational materials and their creators, raising the stakes for publishers to set and meet high DEI expectations for themselves. Although advocates for change may criticize publishers' ongoing efforts to improve equity and representation in content and to expand diversity in their own workforces as taking too long, publishers are making firm, ongoing commitments to meet these goals.

While the acronym DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) may be familiar, content creators have a special interest in exploring what could be called CDEI: Content, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Principles of CDEI focus on making content more relevant, representative of, and responsive to the society and times in which we live. For example, by 2030, the US Census Bureau projects that half of all Americans 17 and under will identify as non-white. Meanwhile, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics reports that in 2020, 30% of children in this same age group did not live in traditional two-parent households.

Focusing on CDEI is now an integral part of the editorial process. Many publishers have established an organizational mission to publish content that represents and speaks to all readers and to identify the types of stories and information they want to share. Many publishers consult with experts in marginalized communities and hire sensitivity readers to advise on everything from more realistic character development to flagging potentially offensive content and using more informed and nuanced language. CDEI processes are being developed and resources deployed to ensure that new content is scrutinized and even existing content, in the shape of new print runs of older texts and revised editions, is viewed under the microscope and revised to meet current standards.



CDEI and Educational Publishing

Educational publishers, responding to changing standards from states, districts, and adoption boards, have evolved when it comes to DEI, but developments have been gradual. Previously, publishers in this space relied solely on longstanding practices like checklists, tracking representation of races/genders in imagery, having sensitivity reads, and using diverse names. While these tactics have supported diversity goals in the past and continue to be employed in DEI efforts, changes in public expectations now demand an even more thoughtful process.

In recent years, education content producers—both in the K–12 and higher education sectors—have responded to the larger, cultural demand for equity in all areas of society and expanded far beyond this approach to really move the needle to form complex, highly developed, and multi-layered processes. They have been seeking to engage with those in underrepresented communities for input and feedback to make CDEI an essential consideration in the publishing process.

While some publishers are investing more energy, resources, and budget into this area than others, across the market companies of all shapes and sizes are taking some form of action on CDEI—whether that’s assembling internal CDEI taskforces, producing tailored guidelines, providing staff with training on subjects like implicit bias, or recruiting external companies and support to provide editorial guidance or advice on inclusive language, imagery, and accessibility. Perhaps a clear indication of its growing significance is that most education publishers now feature CDEI as part of their DEI pledges and corporate mission statements.

Why Does CDEI Matter?



Students engage more deeply with content that reflects their own experiences, families, and backgrounds.



Publishers have a responsibility, not just to their students and educators but also to society as a whole. “They must offer the highest quality educational content experiences that match the diversity of our customers when and where they are,” said Jeanne Zalesky, Head of Content Acquisitions & Development, Oxford University Press, North American Higher Education. With diverse students and teachers from multiple nationalities, ethnic groups, races, religions, genders, and abilities consuming content, the industry must produce content that accurately represents these diverse populations and perspectives, and that nobody feels offended, alienated, or excluded. Meeting CDEI goals not only helps ensure that all students feel included in the learning space, but also aids instructional outcomes by mitigating barriers to understanding. “Our content will be in formats that are flexible, interactive, measurable, unbiased, and accessible to allow us to meet the individual needs of our evolving student and instructor customers with an efficient learning path that optimizes learning outcomes,” said Zalesky.



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“Research demonstrates the benefits of CDEI for students and educators,” noted Vanessa Vaughn, Senior Director of Content Services at KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd. “Studies have found positive relationships between access to inclusive content and measurable data on student success, such as GPAs and test performance

metrics. Students engage more deeply with content that reflects their own experiences, families, and backgrounds. They also hone critical thinking skills by having more opportunities to learn about the experiences and viewpoints of others.” When publishers incorporate CDEI principles throughout their materials, therefore, they are demonstrating their commitments to supporting student achievement.

Understandably, publishers are keen to espouse the importance of DEI and to showcase the progress they are making in this area, and they often do. However, if content doesn’t play a central role in a publisher’s DEI strategy, then their genuine advances in this area could be deemed as tokenistic, and they could be accused of failing to practice what they preach.

“We have established and shared guidelines for identifying bias in educational content across the Press, are actively engaging with DEI specialist reviews and remediation of all new or revised content strategies, and have begun facilitating workshops on bias and content across the content teams and the authoring community,” said Zalesky of how content fits into the Oxford University Press DEI work.

CDEI is also becoming a commercial imperative for educational publishers and a critical factor in the decision-making process in schools. According to a report by the National Education Association, at least 16 states have passed legislation to expand culturally responsive education (CRE) across curricula, teacher development training, and book lists in public schools. These efforts specifically address racism, sexism, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to American history, and issues of equality and justice. Examples include Connecticut becoming the first state to require high schools to offer African American studies, and Latino studies, soon to be followed by Native American studies, as part of the required social studies curriculum. Illinois has passed its own legislation to require the teaching of Asian American history, including “the study of the wrongful incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.” Washington State, meanwhile, now requires ongoing training programs in cultural and racial inclusivity for staff, teachers, administrators, school directors, and superintendents.

The emergence of these mandates across public school districts means that publishers’ content is under increasing scrutiny and failing to incorporate specific pedagogy via state standards or course requirements for representation and inclusivity may result in lost adoption opportunities.



Not Everyone Is Pro-CDEI

While some states in the US are passing legislation to expand CRE, other states are moving in the opposite direction. Several parties, including conservative advocacy groups, parents, and school boards, are increasingly restricting what information students can be taught, going so far as to ban books and even entire courses and topics.

Educational materials have long been a political hot-button issue, and some market-leading states such as Florida and Texas have proposed high-profile measures aimed at removing what is perceived as inappropriate content from the classroom. In 2022, Florida, for example, notably rejected more than 50 math textbooks submitted for adoption, stating that many of them contained “prohibited topics.” Both states have sought to stop inclusion of instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity. Although critical race theory – a complex study of how the concept of race has interacted with laws and policies over time – is not typically taught in K–12 curricula, numerous legislatures have worked to ban it.

For publishers who seek to have their content in classrooms across the country, navigating these two starkly opposed poles proves challenging. As Julie Hoover, Director, Learning Architecture at Imagine Learning said: “Though there is no consensus in the US about what the CDEI goals are, and things differ from state to state, publishers can have DEI in their content without promoting an agenda.”

Hoover notes that, if publishers do not start to set their larger DEI mission and begin to look for content that appeals to a larger audience, using rubrics to evaluate current and backlist content, “they will begin to look out of touch, non-responsive, and appear not to care about students and teachers.”



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How to Focus on CDEI

For many publishers, how to begin implementing CDEI is a difficult and perhaps costly decision. Hoover, whose CDEI guidelines for Imagine Learning is a comprehensive 100-page living document, said that no matter their size or how daunting this task might be, every publisher must start the same: identify the company's DEI mission, and use those ideals to set goals, and start from there.

"It is important to have an internal dialogue among company stakeholders about values that are important to the company. Identify those employees who are interested and passionate about DEI to help define the goals. Once those goals are defined, that is when the work really begins," said Hoover.

Companies may opt to create their own guidelines, as Imagine Learning did, for how to represent and appeal to all readers, or they may contract companies with expertise in CDEI to help develop their goals and standards.

Vaughn pointed out that publishers must be prepared to regularly update any DEI-related materials after their initial creation. "As US society and demographics continually change, content creators will need to be mindful of the most current best practices and expectations for CDEI. Publishers who regularly review and incorporate forward-looking principles and language into their guidelines will be more likely to produce materials that feel timely. Think about, for example, the editorial shift from the terms "African American" or "black" to "Black" that happened in most media outlets in 2020. Soon, brand-new materials using the older preferred language may seem outdated to students and teachers."

Seeking input from people and groups whom publishers are trying to engage and include is essential. "Feedback from authors, instructors, and students has been positive overall with the idea that teachers (who are also our authors) truly want their students to see themselves in the content, included, and fairly represented so that they can better engage and relate with the material and course," said Zalesky. "We are actively seeking greater diversity across our authorial, peer reviewer and contributor communities and making great efforts to include more from underrepresented learners across the board."

In addition, though guidelines and goals for CDEI are not uniform, as Hoover noted, there are professional organizations that are working hard to create those with which publishers can engage.

One way that publishers today seek to support overall DEI outcomes is by recruiting a more diverse workforce. By collaborating with content creators including authors, editors, reviewers, illustrators, and others from a variety of backgrounds, publishers can draw on a spectrum of lived experiences to inform CDEI as well as encourage wider DEI objectives. These efforts can also limit worries that publishers might be seen of making promises of progress but failing to practice what they preach.

"OUP has embarked on a continuous improvement program that consists of expert consultation with a number of universities and institutional partners, including a leading web accessibility expert involved in the creation of WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) and disability librarians who have validated our approach," said Zalesky. "To address customer needs, the Higher Ed division commissions VPATS (Voluntary Product Accessibility Template) for its delivery platforms as well as creates Product Accessibility Reports for every key title."



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Challenges



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Although the path forward may seem clear, there are many challenges along the way. One challenge is the relatively homogeneous demographic and socio-economic composition of the educational publishing industry itself. As publishers seek to accurately represent the diverse lived experiences of their audience, they may find that their own relatively small editorial staffs simply cannot represent every voice. Engaging with individuals and organizations who can provide that information is crucial. Content development partners with extensive freelancer networks can also facilitate access to diverse resources.

For publishers with products in foreign markets, there might also be a challenge of understanding the local culture and customs which requires additional time and focus, as noted by Philip Kuras, Editorial Director, KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

“Several of our clients are based in different countries or active in overseas markets. To successfully address the unique challenges in these markets, we work closely with our clients in the early stages of manuscript development to affirm that our content is culturally relevant,” noted Kuras. “We make certain that our internal and external teams are well-versed in a particular market's expectations, so the products we develop for publishers reflect the cultural sensitivities in those regions.”

Even for products developed for the US market, establishing parameters for what is inclusive and equitable can feel like a moving target. Hoover noted that the leadership of Imagine Learning encourages all teams to engage with DEI processes. Each individual can share concerns or questions, or propose new areas of DEI for exploration. This supports their guidelines' continued evolution as a living document through the collection of more information and feedback.

Time is also a challenge that publishers face. “We need to make CDEI part of our business-as-usual culture and while that is certainly our direction of travel, it doesn't occur in a day's time,” said Zalesky.

Creating and implementing guidelines in current and forthcoming content is incredibly important and can be time-consuming, particularly on top of day-to-day work. That workload is compounded by focusing not only on current content but also addressing CDEI issues in backlist content.

To help with this work, many publishers seek the support of an outside resource versed in CDEI, which can help identify how to better make forthcoming content more equitable and inclusive, and which past editions should be updated to reflect current needs in the marketplace.

“Publishers can choose to perform a CDEI review and update as part of their established publishing plans, or to fast track certain content areas or materials for a new printing,” Vaughn commented. “Reviewing an existing social studies textbook against newly-established or updated DEI guidelines may be a priority even if that particular program isn't slated for a new edition in the short-term. Trained CDEI reviewers can be a real asset to publishers tackling this task for the first time.”

Getting it Wrong

Evolving social norms combined with the widespread reach of social media have created a particularly fraught landscape for educational publishers.

Textbooks often land in the center of political and cultural debates, and content that might have passed scrutiny in earlier editions can suddenly become the focus of intense outrage. Imagery, captions, features, and other stand-out content pieces require particularly careful attention due to their high-profile placement on the page.

In recent years, educational materials spanning content areas from US history to nursing have drawn unwanted attention for missing the mark on CDEI. Public outrage reverberated far beyond classrooms and lecture halls. Widespread reports were featured in global media outlets, and social media further amplified the public outcry and demands for swift and immediate action.

The repercussions for publishers who are responsible for producing content deemed offensive or problematic can be serious, regardless of the perceived size of the infraction, the scale of ignorance, or the presence of intent. On a commercial level, books that fall below expectations and are “outed” in this way can be withdrawn from schools and institutions permanently and almost overnight, giving competitors the opportunity to gain market share. But perhaps most significant is the reputational damage that can follow a named publisher, which is very difficult to overcome in the short-term with a heartfelt public apology. Careful attention to every detail and consistent application of CDEI can help prevent these crises.

Reaping the Rewards

While the financial benefits of focusing on CDEI for publishers is a quantitative one, publishers also reap qualitative benefits. Content creators can feel proud of their efforts to expand representation and support students on their path to becoming informed and engaged members of society. Hoover noted that, in the hard work that the Imagine Learning team have done in creating the company’s CDEI guidelines, they have been able to help other publishers to navigate this new focus on DEI and “that has been a positive growth experience.”

Summary

Overall, the implementation of CDEI is one of the most important changes to publishing in the 21st century. The days of the traditional, Western-centric publishing perspective are gone. Publishers are diversifying their own staff and know that their content must be inclusive and reflective of their audience. This means going beyond mentioning some diverse names and images. They must represent diversity in race, religion, gender identity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, and ability, among other considerations. They must begin by determining their goals and quickly put a new content process into place. “Publishers and content development partners like KGL have shared goals of providing the best possible learning outcomes through high-quality educational materials for many years,” observed Vaughn. “Working together to realize DEI goals is a natural step in the journey from conceptualization to classroom.”

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