



Agency by the American Enterprise Institute

ELA Knowledge Map™

2025

The achievement gap is, in large part, a knowledge gap. Compelling research strongly affirms that students' reading levels – particularly from fifth grade onwards – relate deeply to their level of background content knowledge.ⁱ Students in more affluent systems demonstrate more success in skill-based English language arts (ELA) assessments not only because they are better at “recognizing main ideas,” but also because they are far more likely to know more about the subject matter discussed in any given text. Research from around the world shows the same: [most democracies around](#) the world require all schools to teach a standard body of knowledge, and a comprehensive, content-rich curriculum is a signature feature of [high-performing education systems](#). Despite the research record, a large number of the United States' ELA curricula treat texts not as a source of building knowledge, but merely as a site for attempting to hone abstract reading skills.

Determining whether a particular ELA curriculum is “standards aligned” is a helpful step, but it does not tell us about the knowledge-building capacity of that curriculum.ⁱⁱ For example, instructional materials may use publisher-written texts that satisfy the standards-based requirement for “textual complexity,” but if the materials fail to offer students a sequenced, knowledge-rich learning experience, they miss a critical opportunity to build reading fluency. Merely drilling students on “finding the main idea” will never help them become better readers. Instead, students need to understand what the text is really about - something that can only be achieved by acquiring the background knowledge.

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy (Institute) has developed the ELA Knowledge Map™, a tool with which to evaluate an ELA curriculum in terms of the knowledge it offers students, both about the world (mainly through nonfiction texts) and about psychology and the human condition (through both nonfiction and fiction texts). The Institute conducts this analysis by “mapping” the knowledge domains implicit in the selection of the documents to be read, while also evaluating each text's quality and the coherence of the unit in which is taught. To measure coherence, we assess the degree to which supporting materials in a unit amplify and deepen the specific knowledge offered in the anchor text.

Each review generates two visual reports: *Knowledge Heat Maps* and *Unit Quality & Coherency Graphs*.ⁱⁱⁱ The reports depict the fields of knowledge opened and those missed, in each grade and cumulatively, and with what quality of texts.

The Knowledge Map™ is a one-of-a-kind analytic resource that enables policymakers, school leaders, and parents to better understand the overall strengths and weaknesses of a given curriculum; instructional leaders to “fill in gaps” that might exist; and publishers to continuously improve the materials they offer the public.

Description of Course

For the following report, the Institute evaluated the Agency curriculum developed by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). The curriculum entails thirty supplemental lessons intended for use at a high school level alongside existing curricula, with the stated goal of enabling students to develop life goals and an understanding of choices and consequences.

High-Level Findings

The Agency curriculum is a high-quality, specialized curriculum that focuses on resources aligned with its stated goals. The curriculum received an overall text quality score of 76.95%, which falls within the Institute’s range for high quality. Additionally, the curriculum presents in-depth knowledge building in topics regarding sociology, psychology, and certain aspects of philosophy. The available resources also expand into other areas of knowledge, indicating that the curriculum could easily be utilized in the classroom in a way that ties into broader humanities curricula.

Strengths of Curriculum

Agency contains a wide range of rich, high-quality texts that expose students to its ideas in a powerful way. Figure 1 below demonstrates the diversity in resource types, including both nonfiction and fiction, and reveals that students learn from many types of resources. The curriculum includes a good balance of primary and secondary sources, as demonstrated visually in Figure 2. This enables students not only to gain knowledge from these sources, but also to develop analytical skills that allow them to learn through a variety of means.

In addition to the variety of resources available to students, this curriculum has also sourced meaningful, high-quality texts. The curriculum as a whole scored strongly for text quality, due largely to the presence of strong and historically relevant texts - including poems from Rudyard Kipling and William Ernest Henley and speeches from Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. Care has clearly been taken when determining the resources that make up this curriculum.

Agency focuses predominantly on the development of social and psychological skills; however, the Institute’s analysis revealed an exploration of topics regarding philosophy and religion. Between excerpts from religious texts, a study of virtue as a concept, and an introduction to Stoicism, the curriculum introduces students to high-level concepts in an age-appropriate way.

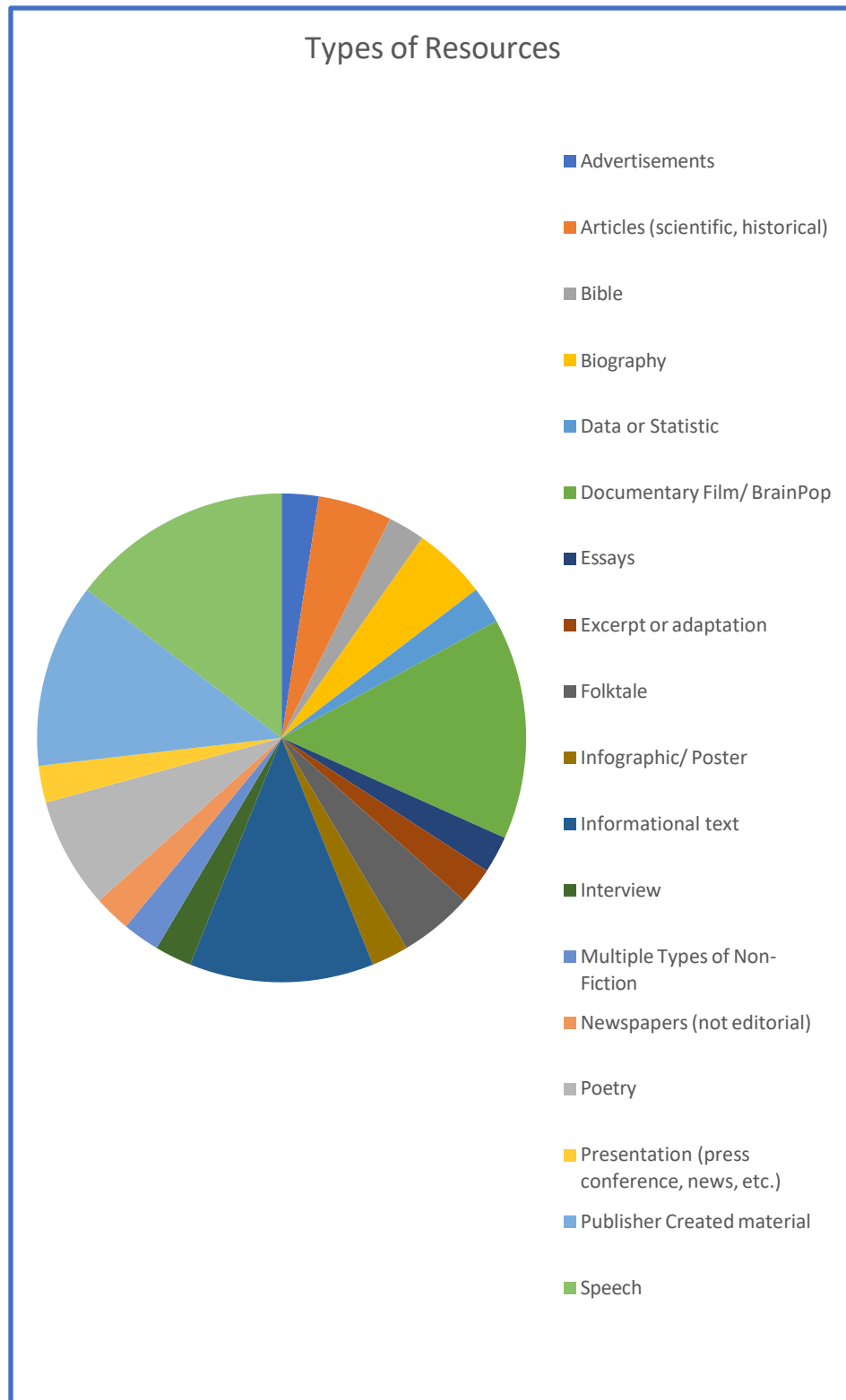


Figure 1. Analysis of resource types in the Agency curriculum.

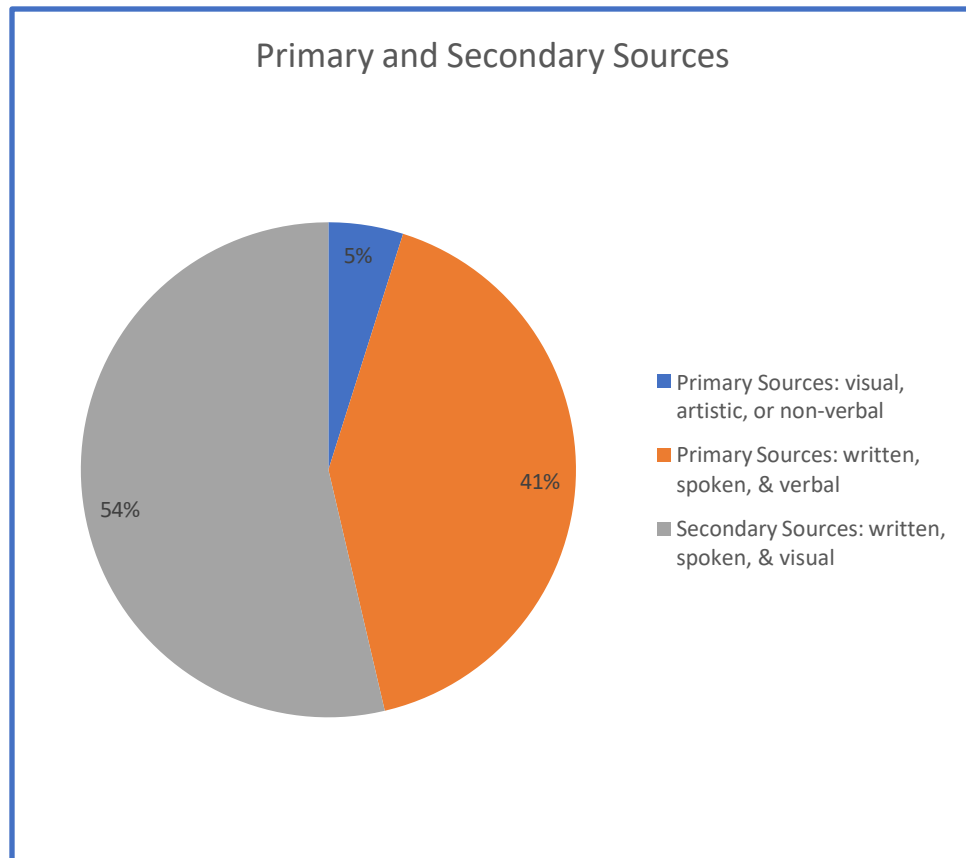


Figure 2. Visual representation of primary and secondary sources in the Agency curriculum.

Weaknesses of Curriculum

Though the materials available in the curriculum are both high-quality and diverse in type, there is less of a focus on visual resources such as art. The curriculum could benefit from additional non-text formats for its resources, in order to give students exposure to an even wider variety of ways to learn while also expanding coverage of knowledge domains such as Fine Arts, which is currently not addressed in the curriculum.

Additionally, the curriculum presents limited coverage of topics related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Details of this knowledge domain's analysis are expanded upon in the Heat Map section of this report; to summarize, materials that cover these topics primarily focus on aspects of the African-American experience and briefly the experience of women, with no other groups depicted. The curriculum and students learning from it could potentially benefit from further exploration of other cultural groups' experience in the United States.

Institute Recommendations

The Knowledge Map™ analysis highlights crucial areas of knowledge building and assesses topical coherence. The curriculum meets its stated goals of being a high-quality, supplemental set of lessons that promotes students' agency. Based on the analysis performed on the Agency curriculum, subsequent versions could include the following items to bolster its knowledge-building aspects:

- Incorporate additional resources to improve coverage of various cultural groups as indicated within the Institute's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion knowledge domain.
- Provide stronger context behind the primary sources, 2 – 3 paragraphs, to reinforce an understanding of each source's time period. At present, the Institute's evaluated historical domains are not extensively covered, and students learning from this curriculum will need to gain this context from outside sources in order to best understand the materials.

The report will now elaborate on the specific findings of the Knowledge Map™ exercises.

Agency Curriculum Knowledge/Heat Maps

One of the Institute's critical gateway questions addresses the level of exposure students receive to each important domain of knowledge and to the topics within those domains. Each heat map expresses the findings visually using a color-coding scheme, as shown in Figure 1 below. Lighter blue squares represent fewer knowledge-building texts while darker blue squares represent more knowledge-building texts. The number within the box represents the total texts covering each particular topic. Texts that do not provide robust exposure to any topic are marked with the 'No Meaningful Knowledge' tag.

As the Agency curriculum is intended to serve as a specialized supplement program, it is designed to focus its coverage on certain topics. As such, the results of the Institute's heat map analysis are organized here into three categories—knowledge-building domains with extensive coverage, domains that the curriculum expands into coverage of, and domains that are not covered. One resource within the curriculum was tagged for No Meaningful Knowledge; however, the resource is a video intended to elicit a sense of awe and wonderment in students, and its inclusion makes sense in the broader context of the course.

A mere mention of a topic does not necessarily indicate exposure to that topic. The Institute tags a topic only when the text's presentation of it is robust enough for a student to convey specific facts about it. This metric considers the context of age and grade level.

Extensive Knowledge-Building Domains

The curriculum presents robust knowledge building in several domains and additional topics, shown below alphabetically when similarly rated. Strong knowledge-building domains appear in the Heat Maps as dark blue, indicating that many texts address the topic.

The Sociology & Psychology domain (Figure 3) is covered extensively throughout the included materials, aligning with AEI’s stated goals for the curriculum. The heat map for this domain indicates that nearly all evaluated topics are included in many texts; the Self-Awareness tag appeared most frequently, followed by the tags for Interpersonal Skills and Responsible Decision Making.

The curriculum also includes notable coverage of the Philosophy & Religion domain (Figure 4). Though not all aspects of the domain appeared in the materials, the Institute’s analysis revealed a particular focus on the Ethics and Western Philosophy topics. When considering the intended grade level of this curriculum, the inclusion of these topics could potentially be used to foster classroom discussion.

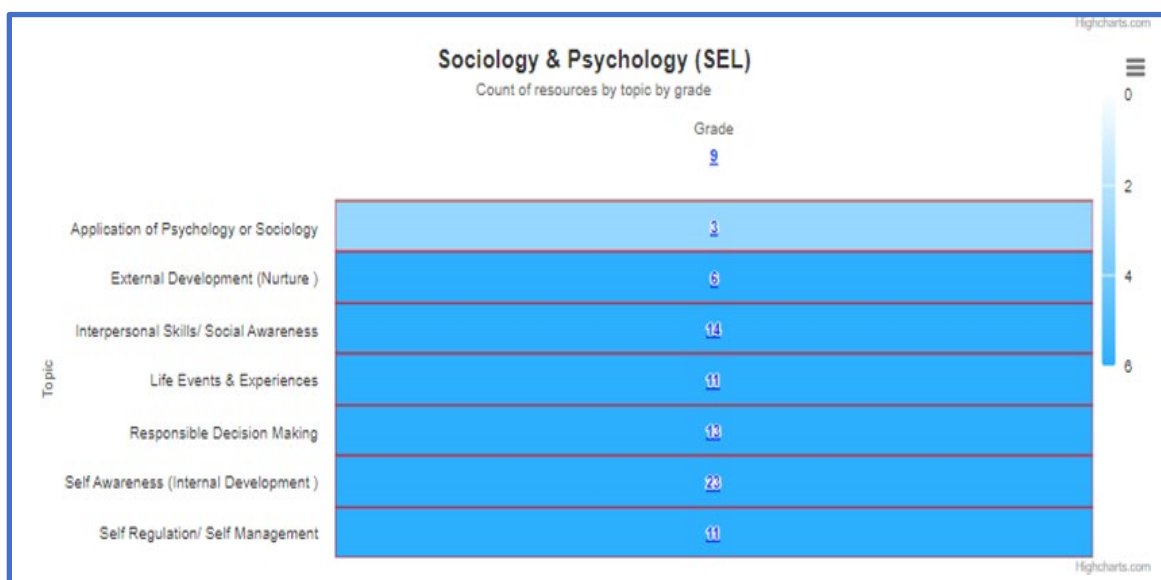


Figure 3. Heat Map analysis of the Sociology & Psychology (SEL) knowledge domain.

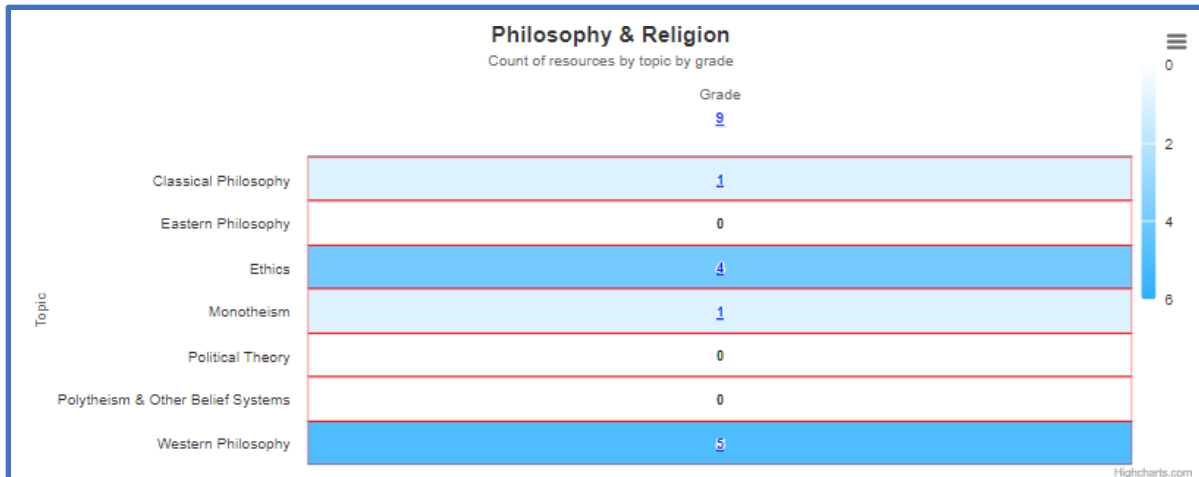


Figure 4. Heat Map analysis of the Philosophy & Religion knowledge domain.

Knowledge-Building Domains with Some Coverage

The curriculum expands its knowledge into eight domains that the Institute evaluates. Namely, these domains with partial coverage are America to 1877 (Figure 5), America Since 1877 (Figure 6), Geography (Figure 7), Life Science (Figure 8), Literature in English (Figure 9), Technology & Mathematics (Figure 10), World History Since 1700 (Figure 11), and World Literature (Figure 12). These domains reveal areas in which teachers could incorporate lessons from the *Agency* curriculum in their coursework using the shared topics as a hook.



Figure 5. Heat Map analysis of the America to 1877 knowledge domain.

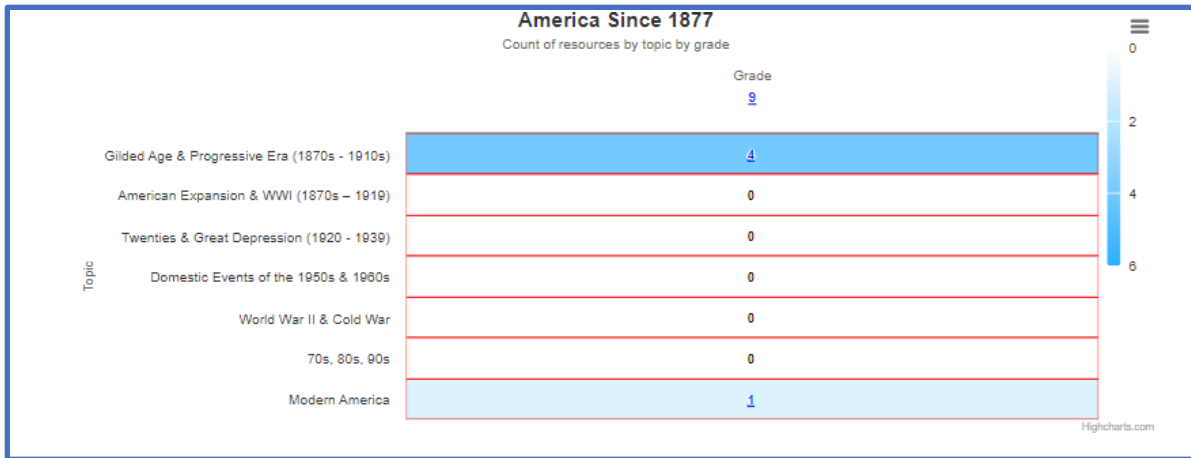


Figure 6. Heat Map analysis of the America Since 1877 knowledge domain.

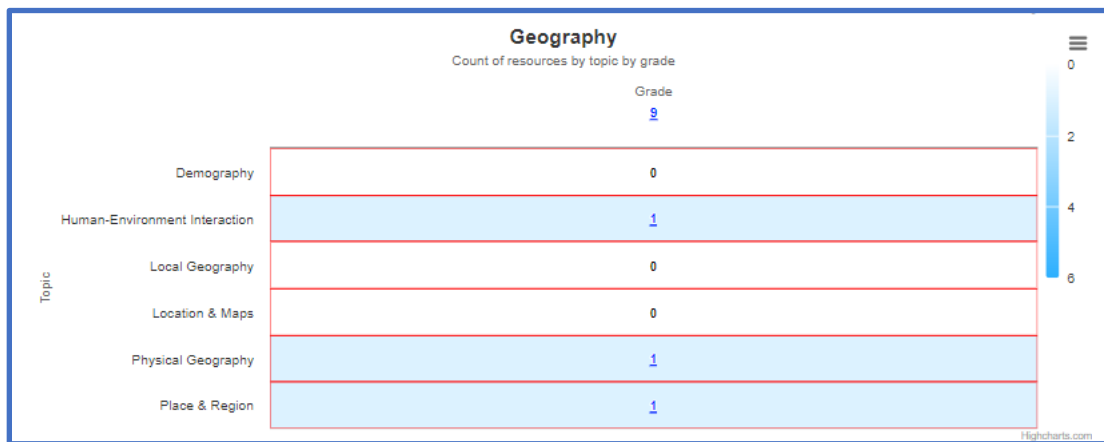


Figure 7. Heat Map analysis of the Geography knowledge domain.

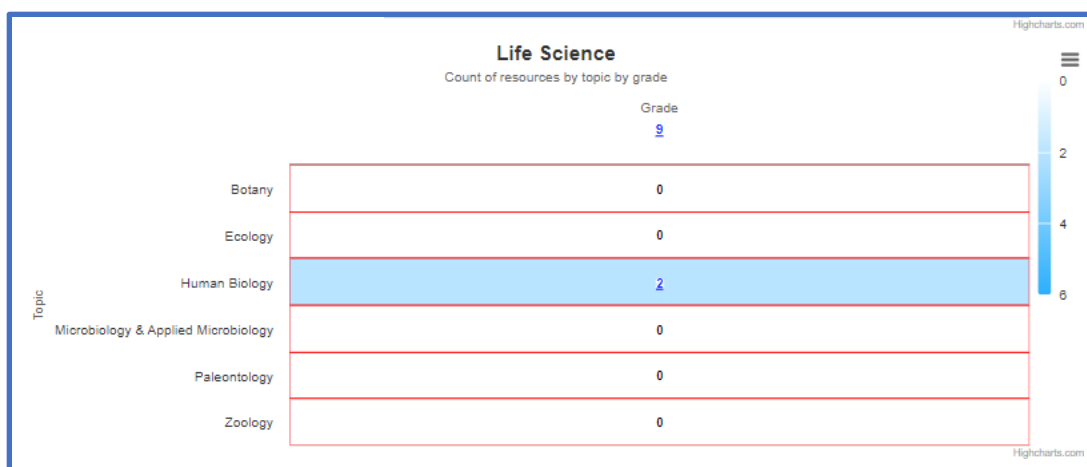


Figure 8. Heat Map analysis of the Life Science knowledge domain.

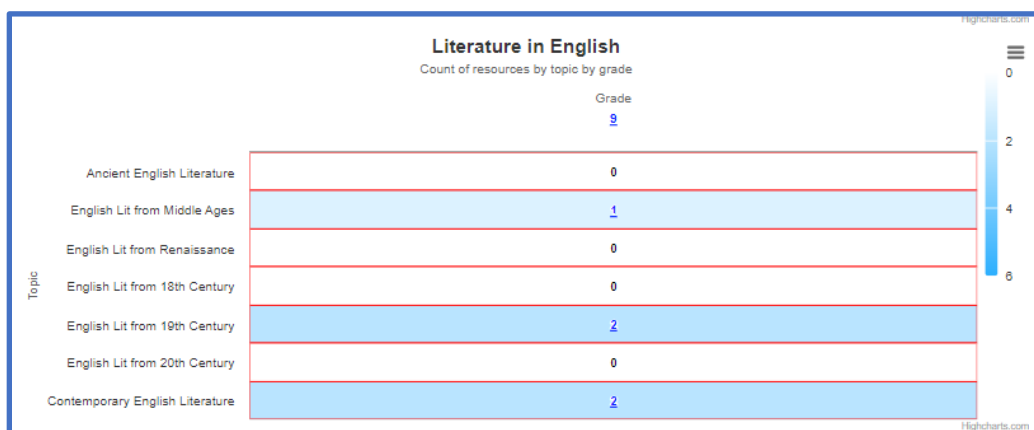


Figure 9. Heat Map analysis of the Literature in English knowledge domain.

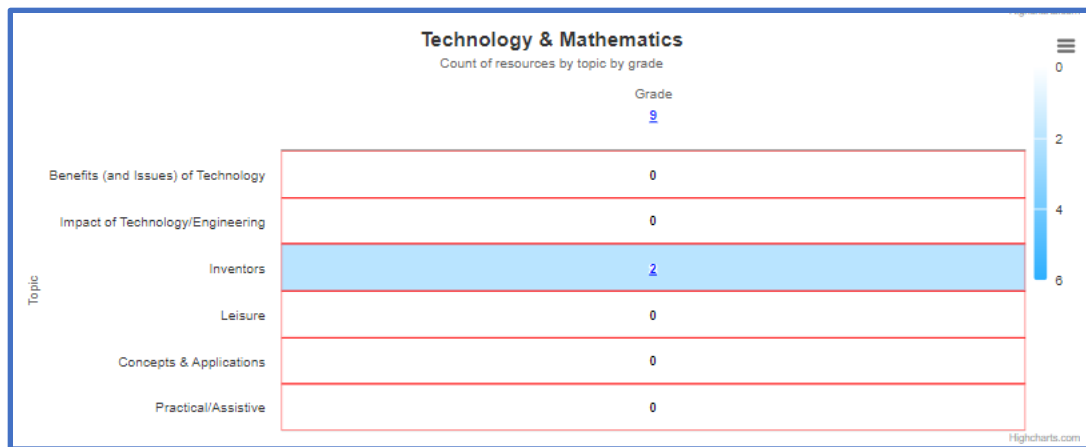


Figure 10. Heat Map analysis of the Technology & Mathematics knowledge domain.

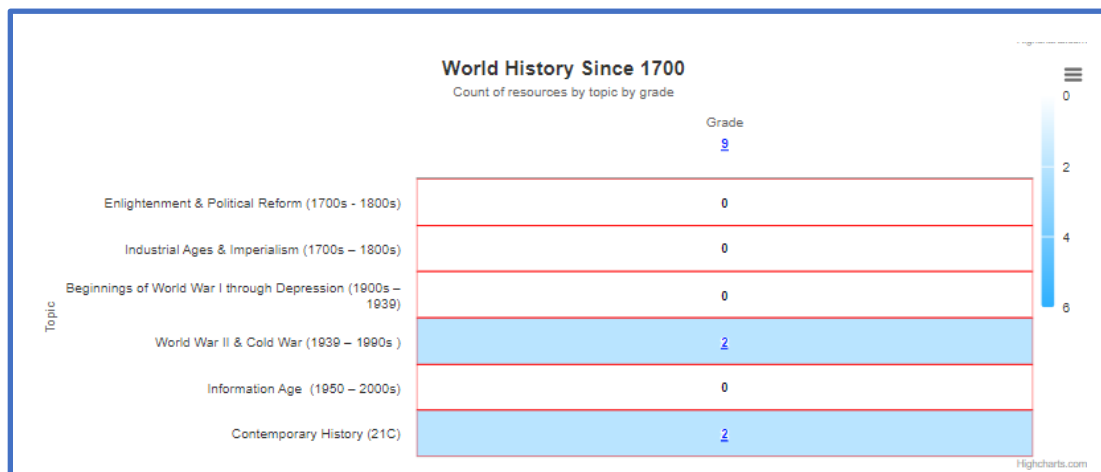


Figure 11. Heat Map analysis of the World History Since 1700 knowledge domain.

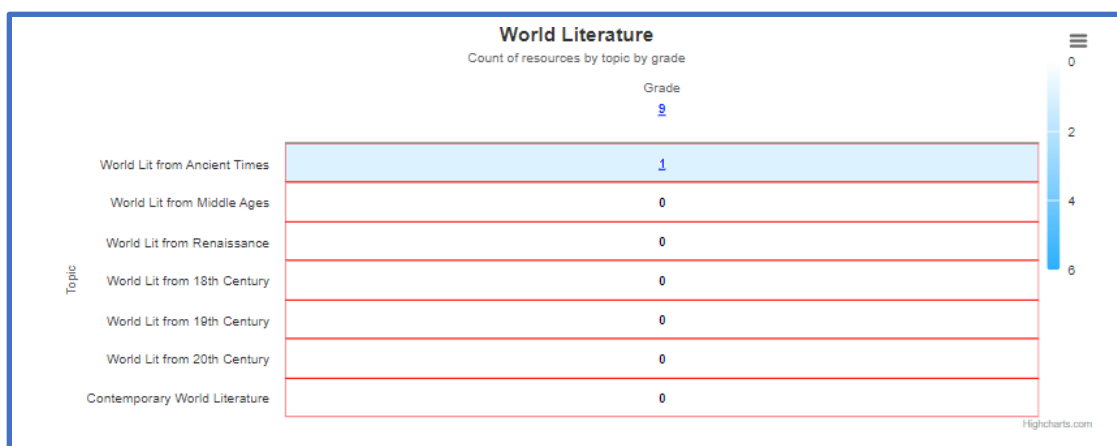


Figure 12. Heat Map analysis of the World Literature knowledge domain.

Domains Not Covered

Five evaluated knowledge domains were not addressed by any evaluated sources in this curriculum—Fine Arts; Global & Historical Themes; Government, Civics, & Citizenship; World History to 1700s; and Physical Science. Particularly regarding a supplemental curriculum like Agency, it is important to note that these absences may reflect curricular progression decisions and other factors, and that the Heat Maps should be considered in the context of the evaluated system. However, significant gaps may be worth examining in order to further develop knowledge reinforcement within the curriculum.

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Domain

Among the domains evaluated as part of the heat map exercise is the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion domain, which measures the presence of texts addressing the experiences of specific cultural groups. Ideally, culturally responsive texts should represent a spectrum of positive, neutral, and negative aspects of a group's experience in the United States. Heat Maps with strong results for the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion domain indicate that students receive meaningful instruction related to these experiences. Many academic materials can be rated for cultural responsiveness, including everything from picture books to documentary films. The Institute reviewed the Agency materials for cultural responsiveness across the evaluated grade levels.

The Institute's findings are presented in two formats. Figure 13 shows the standard Heat Map analysis for topics within the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) domain, while Figure 14 further divides the topics by how diverse populations are represented across sources. Though the curriculum presents strong coverage of various aspects of the African-American experience in the United States, coverage of other groups is limited; only one source focuses

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Quality

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for quality according to the rubrics below.

Rubrics for Quality

The Institute applies three rubrics for text quality analysis – a fiction rubric, nonfiction rubric, and literary nonfiction rubric. All rubrics consider content knowledge and language. Rubrics for fiction and literary nonfiction (nonfiction material presented in a narrative format) include additional factors relevant to the genres, such as emotion and prominence. The nonfiction rubric omits these factors in favor of focusing on the source’s accuracy and quality.

Fiction and Literary Nonfiction (15 possible points)

Evocation of Emotion: The degree to which the text is memorable due to its impact upon the reader’s affect. Works that may achieve high emotion scores include Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet* and Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

Language: The degree to which the text contains outstanding language and derives effect from several factors, including:

- Clarity (James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, Austen’s *Emma*)
- Appeal to the imagination (Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*)
- Sophisticated capacity at multiple levels, including cultural, social, metaphorical, and/or theological (Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*).

Timeless and Profound Questions: The degree to which a text addresses perpetual issues of the human condition, such as private or public ethics, obedience to the state, family allegiance, meaning, and purpose. Works that may achieve high scores on this metric include Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Camus’s *The Stranger*.

Content Knowledge: The degree to which text builds students’ background knowledge about the world. Strong examples on this metric include Erdrich’s *Birchbark House* for elementary students or Austen’s *Pride & Prejudice* for secondary students.

Prominence: The degree to which a text is widely known. Several factors determine a text’s prominence, including:

- Longevity: The degree to which the text has entered the American literary canon, meaning that the text remains widely read for at least fifty years since its publication (Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Thoreau’s *Walden*).
- Current prominence: The degree to which the text is a contemporary classic, meaning that it appears widely in American schools in recent years (Cisneros’s *Last House on Mango Street*, Satrapi’s *Persepolis*).
- Awards: The degree to which the text has been recognized as outstanding by critics or through awards. Notable literary awards include the Nobel Prize in Literature, Booker

Prize, John Newberry, Man Booker Award, [PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction](#), Pulitzer Prize, the [Coretta Scott King](#) Awards, or [Pura Belpre Awards](#). More examples of critical literary acclaim appear [here](#).

- Accuracy & Source (literary nonfiction only): The verifiable factual basis for the information and the bias profile of the source.

Nonfiction (12 possible points)

Accuracy: The degree to which the text is empirically accurate.

Source Quality: The degree to which the text comes from a high-caliber source. The Institute assigned an initial numerical value to news sources, and added quality scores upon encountering new sources. Relevant links can be found [here](#).

Language: The degree to which the text is well written and presents its subject matter effectively.

Content Knowledge: The degree to which the text effectively builds background knowledge of the topic or subtopic at hand.

Agency Curriculum Quality & Coherence Findings

The quality and coherence findings for the Agency curriculum follow in the sections below. As the curriculum is not divided into traditional 'units,' the Institute's standard unit analysis does not apply; instead, the curriculum as a whole was evaluated for quality and coherence.

The Institute considers a unit or text high-quality if it scores 75% or above, and a score is acceptable as low as 61%. Any lower score indicates that a unit or text scored poorly overall.

Agency received an overall quality score of 76.95%, placing it in the high quality band. Figure 15 below visually demonstrates the quality scores for each resource in the curriculum, with the left line representing the Institute's threshold for acceptable quality and the right line representing its threshold for high quality. Only six evaluated resources failed to reach the threshold for acceptable quality, indicating the presence of generally good or excellent materials overall. The curriculum's primary sources largely scored within the range for high-quality resources, while quality varied more notably among the secondary sources.

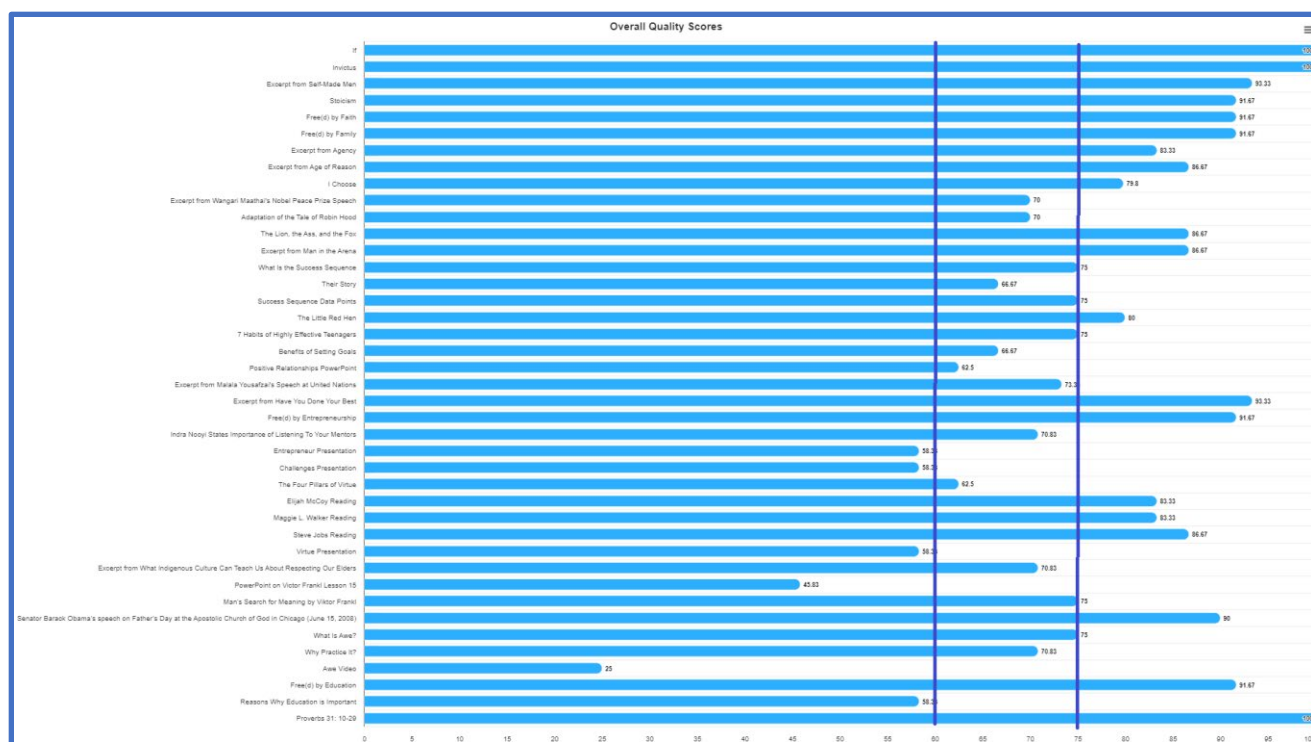


Figure 15. Individual text quality scores for resources in the Agency curriculum.

The curriculum also demonstrated strong coherence, as demonstrated visually in Figure 16 below. All but one of the resources reinforce at least one topic that is present in another source, and resources were predominantly connected by a focus on topics in the previously mentioned Sociology & Psychology knowledge domain; for instance, 56 percent of the materials were tagged for the Self Awareness topic. Thirty-six of the forty-one evaluated resources reinforce two or more topics that are addressed in other resources, indicating a strong knowledge build as these topics are expanded upon throughout the lessons. Some topics, such as Ancient Literature in the World Literature domain and Westward Movement & Expansion in the America to 1877 domain, are introduced by one resource but not revisited. In these cases, students will likely need additional background information on the topics in question, either through the introduction of new resources in this curriculum or by a lesson within a broader curriculum.

One resource, the 'Awe' video, was tagged for No Meaningful Knowledge and does not share any knowledge reinforcement with the rest of the curriculum. However, this video was included to invoke wonderment in the viewer, and works in the context of the course despite this.

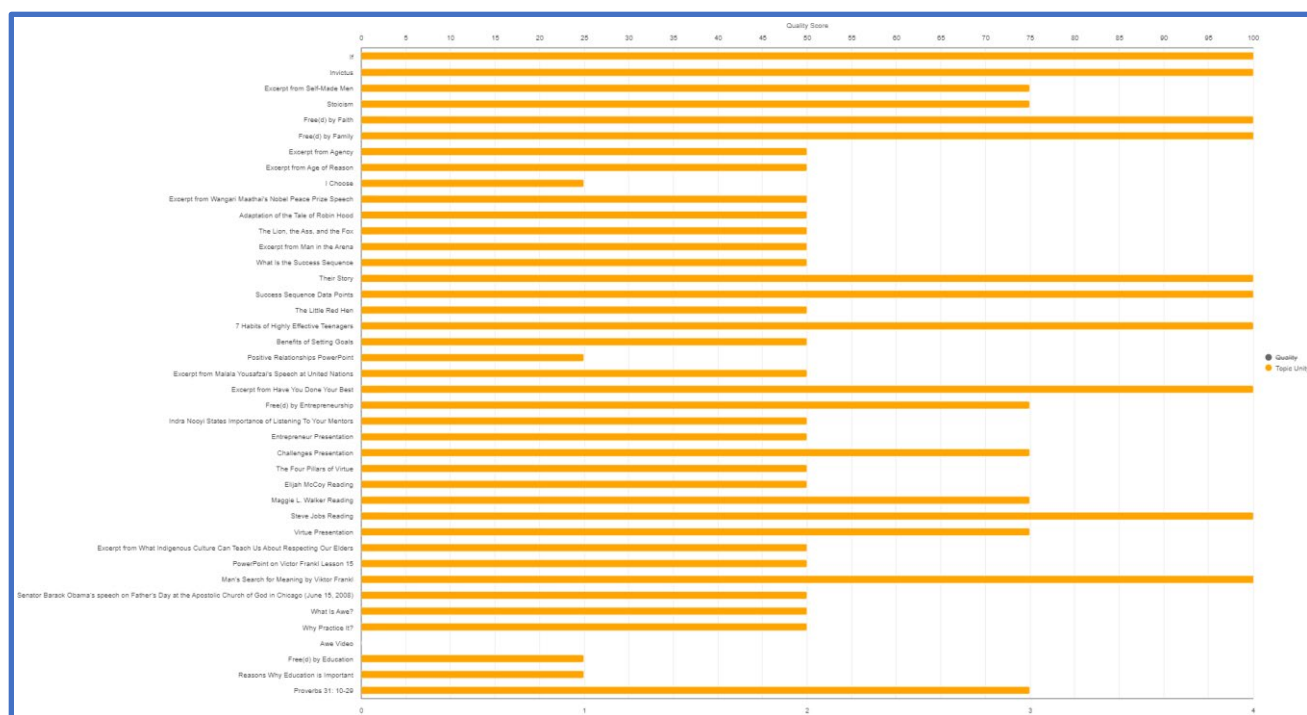


Figure 16. Individual text coherence scores for resources in the Agency curriculum.

Reid Smith et al., "The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension: A Critical Review," *Reading Psychology* 42, no. 3 (April 3, 2021): 214–40). Sonia Q. Cabell and Hyejin Hwang, "Building Content Knowledge to Boost Comprehension in the Primary Grades," *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no. S1 (2020): S99–107, <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/rrq.338> and also Kathryn S. McCarthy and Danielle S.

McNamara, "The Multidimensional Knowledge in Text Comprehension Framework," *Educational Psychologist* 56, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 196–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2021.1872379>).

ii "Standards aligned" generally refers to the Common Core State Standards

iii Unit coherency maps will only be generated if the curriculum materials enable that form of analysis.