

Characters of Colour: A Content Analysis of Picture Books in a Virgin Islands Elementary School Library*

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to determine if the picture book collection at the Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library accurately reflects and therefore serves the needs of the majority of its students. A disparity exists between the actual ethnicities represented by the school population and those depicted in the picture book collection. Less than ten percent of the books most frequently selected by kindergarten through 3rd grade students depict realistic stories and a disproportionate percentage (88%) of books have settings in the United States. This study can be used as a model to examine elementary school libraries on each of the three main islands (St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas) to identify how well their collections reflect the ethnicities of their students.

Keywords: Caribbean, Collection development, Content analysis, Ethnic groups, Picture books, School libraries, Virgin Islands

1. Introduction

The United States Virgin Islands lie between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, just east of Puerto Rico. There are three main islands - St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. Their combined area is about twice the size of Washington, D.C. The harbor in St. Thomas is considered one of the best in the Caribbean. The largest cruise ships in the world can dock in its deep water; hence, tourism drives the economy. The population hovers around 110,000. The



majority of the population is black and West Indian, which reflects the colonial history of the islands. After the abolition of slavery in 1848, the economy shriveled. The United States purchased the islands from Denmark in 1917. The Virgin Islands' current status is an unincorporated territory. Virgin Islanders are United States citizens, but are not allowed to vote in U.S. presidential election (*World Fact Book*, 2004).

St. Thomas is the commercial center of the Virgin Islands. It has the largest population and is locally referred to as 'Rock City' because of its lively nightlife. Immigration, both legal and illegal, from impoverished islands in the Caribbean has added to the heavy burden already being shouldered by the local government (Poinski, 2004).

Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School is located at 68-A Lindbergh Bay, an area just west of Charlotte Amalie, the only city on the island of St. Thomas. Lindbergh Bay is named after the famous aviator Charles A Lindbergh. Lindbergh landed on St. Thomas in an area known as Mosquito Bay in the Spirit of St. Louis in 1928. After his departure, a local family, who owned the property where he landed, changed the name of their property to Lindbergh's Landing (Freehill, 2007). The general area he landed on is now known as Lindbergh Bay.

Gladys A. Abraham Elementary is directly behind the M.J. Kirwan Terrace Housing Project, in the middle of Lindbergh Bay. Built in 1971, it was given the name of the United States Congressman who helped secure the funds to build the adjacent housing project, Michael J. Kirwan. It was renamed in 2006 to honor its first principal, Gladys A. Abraham. Three hundred ninety-six (396) students are enrolled from kindergarten to sixth grade (School Improvement Plan, 2008-2009).

Students come from a variety of areas, which include the housing project, communities adjacent to or near the school, areas more centrally located to the main town, Charlotte Amalie, and communities on the far western end of the island. The families of the children who attend Gladys A. Abraham Elementary are ethnically diverse and vary in structure, socio-economic condition, and geographic origin. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, which include the close proximity of both the housing community and the University of the Virgin Islands to the school, the various communities the students come from, and the large number of immigrants that come to St. Thomas (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2000). All the students are entitled to the federally sponsored free breakfast and lunch program (School Improvement Plan, 2008-2009).

Based on the April 1, 2008 enrollment statistics, sixty-four (64%) percent of the students are Black, thirty-three (33%) percent are Hispanic, and three (3%) percent are White. All written communication is sent out in both English and Spanish. A small, but growing, percentage of French Creole students are

included in the Black enrollment figures. A small number of Arab students are included in the White enrollment figures. Three (3%) percent of the school's population is enrolled in one of two Special Education classes. Eight (8%) percent are enrolled in one of two ELL (English Language Learners) classes (School Improvement Plan, 2008-2009).

The Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library is thirty-seven (37) years old. The original furniture is still in place. Until the collection was weeded at the end of the 2006-2007 school year, large numbers of books from the original collection remained on the shelf. To date, over three thousand (3000) books have been removed from the collection. The technology consists of three computers and two overhead projectors. There is no storytelling room. A storytelling area was created for the primary grades (k-3rd grade) at the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year by placing small chairs in front of the easy-to-read collection. Since the fall of 2006, only books purchased by the district coordinator have been added to the collection. In addition to the non-fiction, fiction, and easy to read books, there is an accelerated reader collection. The general collection is available for browsing and check-out by students from every level, kindergarten through 6th grade. Every class, including Special Education and ELL, visits the library once a week per a fixed schedule for instruction and check-out. Students from grades two (2) through six (6) come periodically throughout the day to check-out accelerated reader books. A kindergarten book bag program was launched at the beginning of the 2007-2008 school year and students take five books home each week in their book bags to read with their parents. Check-out figures exceed 10,000 per year and are done on cards since there is no automation system in place. There is one librarian and no support staff; a parent helps with the accelerated reader collection.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Elementary school librarians are often solely responsible for the selection of picture books. Librarians can ensure, by selecting picture books that portray the culture and heritage of their students, that they will have a meaningful learning experience. Accurate portrayals increase student's self-esteem and interest in learning (Meier, 2003). Librarians must discern between picture books that present stereotyped characters and inaccurate settings and those that provide accurate interpretations and experiences (Mendoza & Reese, 2001).

The extent to which the picture book collection accurately reflects the students in the school can impact their overall success (Bingham, 1970). Picture books are often students' first encounter with literature. Librarians must be sensitive to the needs and feelings of their students. Biased and inaccurate portrayals of any group must be weeded and discarded from the collection (Mosely, 1997). The remainder must be evaluated in order to determine if they adequately support and serve the needs of the student population. If a majority of the students are black West Indians, then the picture book collection should reflect that (Meier, 2003). The purpose of this study is to determine if the picture book

collection at the Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library accurately reflects and therefore serves the needs of a majority of its students.

1.2 Research Questions

- R1. What percentage of the picture books has one or more main characters who represent people of color?
- R2. What ethnicities do the main characters of color represent?
- R3. What percentage of the picture books has one or more main characters of color and is set in the Caribbean?
- R4. What percentage of the picture books has one or more main characters of color and is set in Africa?

1.3 Limitations of the Study

The study does not include picture books located outside of the easy-to-read (primary) collection at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School's library. The study does not include books about animals, fantasies, alphabets, counting or any other topic whose focus is not characters that could be encountered in real-life situations. The findings of the study are limited to the picture book collection at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library.

1.4 Assumptions

It is assumed that the main characters of a story and the ethnicity of the main characters of a story may be accurately determined. It is assumed that the setting of a story may be accurately determined.

1.5 Operational Definitions

Arab: Ethnic group that shares a common language (Arabic) and whose ancestry can be traced back to the Arabian Peninsula or a country that is considered part of the Arab world.

Black: Non-white people of African descent.

Criteria: Guidelines by which books may be evaluated.

Culture: Ideas, behaviors, and things that are valued by the society.

Ethnic Marker: Any of the signs by which ethnic boundaries are defined or maintained, including language, religious and cultural symbols, or territory.

Ethnicity: Groups of people that share the same cultural characteristics.

Hispanic: People of Spanish descent or raised in a Spanish culture.

Insider: An author or illustrator who is the same ethnicity or lives in the same culture as the characters in the book.

Outsider: An author or illustrator who is not the same ethnicity and does not live in the same culture as the characters in the book.

People of Color: People who are not white.

Picture Book: A short book with a simple narrative that is accompanied by illustrations that support and enhance the text.

Stereotype: An image which is false or presents an isolated phenomenon as true of an entire people.

West Indian: People born in the West Indies or Caribbean, a group of islands located in the Caribbean Sea.

White: A person with a light-colored skin; member of the Caucasoid division of humans.

1.6 Importance of the Study

This study provides information that will be used to develop a collection development policy and identify acquisitions that are necessary to serve the picture book needs of a majority of the students at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School. By identifying the ethnicities of the main characters of color, evaluation of the picture book collection can be extended to the Hispanic, French Creole, and Arab minorities in the school. Furthermore, the extent to which the picture book collection provides students with opportunities to learn about distant and diverse cultures can be ascertained.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Early History of the Picture Book

People have used pictures to tell stories since ancient times. Some of the earliest forms of writing used images to convey meaning. Hastings (2002) points out that 'telling stories with pictures is probably as old as telling stories with words'. In the Middle Ages, when books were produced by hand and few people could read, one of the ways people learned about Bible stories was looking at the stained glass in cathedrals and churches. The books that were produced also contained illustrated Bible stories. Walter Crane, a well-known Victorian illustrator, described these books as 'a picture book ... a little mirror of the world' (Hastings, 2002).

The earliest picture books were not intended for children, who could neither afford nor read them. The advent of mechanical printing significantly impacted the availability of books and the spread of literacy among the general population. *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658), which means 'the world in pictures', is considered by many to be the first picture book for children. The

author, John Amos Comenius, realistically depicted life using block prints accompanied by an explanation in text. This format remained the standard for two centuries (Burlingham, 1997).

The quality of picture books significantly improved during the last half of the 19th century. This was due, in large part, to the development of mechanical colored print. Three outstanding illustrators worked during this period – Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott, and Kate Greenaway. They can be credited, along with their printer, Edward Evans, for creating the modern picture book, as we know it (Lundin, 2001).

2.2 Picture Books in the Twentieth Century

Picture books produced at the beginning of the twentieth century took advantage of offset printing, which eliminated the need for borders and allowed the illustrations and text to be placed in a variety of positions. Color was used sparingly because of its expense. *Goodnight Moon* and *Make Way for Ducklings* are examples of books that were produced during this time period. By the fall of 1942, inexpensive picture books, like the Little Golden Books, were being sold for 25 cents. Today, picture books are readily available in developed countries, where literacy is nearly universal and technological advances have significantly reduced the costs to make high quality picture books (Hastings, 2002).

2.3 Picture Books and Children of Color

The proliferation of picture books that occurred around the middle of the 20th century was followed by the civil rights struggle. The production of picture books about children of color by authors and illustrators of color increased during the late 1960s and early 1970s. By the mid-1980s, the publishing industry's interest in authors and illustrators of color dwindled. Publishing statistics support John Steptoe's comments that the increase in books published by authors and illustrators of color was little more than 'a flash in the pan' (Horning, 1993). Questions continue to abound about the authenticity of books about children of color written by white authors.

Needless to say, the 'insider vs. outsider' controversy will remain a topic of concern and research for some time to come. However, since the 1970s independent, or alternative, presses have significantly contributed to the production and proliferation of picture books that positively portray children of color in an accurate and unbiased manner (Horning, 1993). Therefore, the onus is on librarians to ensure that the children they serve have access to picture books that portray their culture and that of others.

School librarians are charged with the responsibility of making sure that the picture book collection in their libraries reflects the diversity of their students. Furthermore, opportunities to learn about other cultures should also be available. Collection policies and new acquisitions should support the

development of a collection that will promote the emotional stability and growth of their students. Picture books can impact children's perceptions about themselves and others both positively and negatively. Mendoza & Reese (2001) recognized that the illustrations and text in a picture book 'combine to create potentially powerful images of human beings' (p. 2). Images that help shape their impressions of themselves and others.

2.4 The Impact of Picture Books on Children of Color

Piaget defined schemata as 'mental images or patterns of action which become a way of representing and organizing all the child's previous sensory motor experience' (quoted in Roethler, 1998). Picture books show children their world and the world of others. They become part of the schemata that they refer to and build on as they grow up. If children's cultural and ethnic groups are not included or are negatively portrayed, it affects their opinion of themselves and understanding of their place in the world family (Roethler, 1998).

The influence of picture books on the psychological growth of children can no longer be discarded or ignored. Picture books that were once thought to be innocuous are now regarded as a significant influence on the psychological development of the children who read them. Picture books influence children's perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Quite simply, picture books influence 'the adult which the child will become' (Roethler, 1998).

The potential persuasiveness of the picture and text to influence the lives of the children that read them cannot be overstated. The repeated exposure to images, negative or positive, becomes part of the child's schemata. Furthermore, the absence of images that reflect a child's culture or ethnicity can be equally damaging. Children cannot judge their place in society if they are not visible. They may not know why a certain picture book evokes certain emotions or makes them feel a certain way, but the influence, positive or negative, intended or not, is there.

Meier (2003) contends that children of color who are exposed to picture books that accurately depict their culture and heritage 'forge a deep and authentic connection to books', which increases the likelihood that they will succeed in school. Children who see and hear themselves in the books that they listen to and read are profoundly affected. Books that they can 'see themselves in' provide a level of familiarity and comfort, one that allows learning to take place in a more productive and meaningful way.

The elementary school librarian's role then, as the picture book provider, is to evaluate the degree to which the collection reflects the diversity of their students. As pointed out by Smith (1993), librarians have a 'moral responsibility' to 'expand and update their collections' so that children of color have the opportunity to gain a strong respect and appreciation for their culture.

When these needs are overlooked, the chance that they will succeed in their environment or that of others is diminished.

2.5 Examining Picture Books

Many researchers have examined picture books to determine the representation of people of color. Caldecott Medal, Honor books, those appearing in well-known bibliographic tools like *The Horn Book* and trade books have been studied and the results are disappointing. Research conducted as recently as 1997 indicates that even after the Civil Rights Movement, the number of picture books with characters of color did not increase for any sustained period of time (Piorfski, 2001).

Nancy Larrick, former president of the International Reading Association, conducted one of the earliest studies in 1965. She surveyed trade books published between the years 1962 and 1965 for characters of color. Less than seven (7%) percent of the five thousand (5000) plus books surveyed had one or more blacks. Almost a decade later, she asserted that 'Integration may be the law of the land, but most of the books children see are all white' (Larrick, 1965).

Studies conducted since 1965 reinforce her findings. In 1979, a sample conducted by Chall et al. of almost five thousand (5,000) children's books found less than fifteen (15%) percent had one or more significant black characters. No main characters of color were found when 3rd grade trade books and basal reading programs were examined by Reimer in 1992. Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) determined that only fifteen (15%) percent of the picture books published over the last five decades had one or more black characters. Although four decades have passed since Larrick's trade book survey, there has been no noticeable change in the representation of people of color in picture books for children (Pirofski, 2001).

The literature suggests that major publishers have had little interest in publishing picture books with characters of color. There has, however, been a concerted effort by independent publishers since the early 1970s to fill the gap. Unfortunately, small presses have small budgets, which has hampered their ability to market relatively unknown authors and illustrators, even those who have received critical acclaim (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). School librarians are frequently responsible for the selection of new books. Ultimately, their selection decisions will determine whether students have access to authentic and accurate images of themselves and others.

One study was found that documented the efforts of a school librarian to determine if the school library's picture book collection reflected the diversity of the students in the school. Mosely (1997) mentions that the method she used to evaluate her collection, content analysis, is commonly used 'to study trends, values, and...it is useful in the investigation of collection development and other

media services' (p.14). The findings were not surprising based on the publication history mentioned above. Although the portrayals of people of color were found to be accurate with little stereotyping, the percentage of books that included characters of color (47.4%) was less than the percentage of students of color (99.3%) (Mosely, 1997).

2.6 Qualitative Content Analysis

Content analysis became a popular research methodology during the 1950s. Researchers used it to study mass communications. Since then, it has been used in many fields including library and information science. Documents can be analyzed by either a qualitative or quantitative method. White and Marsh (2006) describe it as a flexible method that 'suit the unique needs of research questions...and can be applied to many problems in information studies' (p.23). Early in the study, data are 'chunked' so that they can be sampled, collected, and analyzed. They point out that pictures can be used for analysis, with or without text. When used in conjunction with text, they emphasize the relationship between the picture and the text. Sampling and data collection are arrived at pragmatically, while the research questions or hypothesis determine the units to be analyzed.

Qualitative content analysis is humanistic and inductive. Research questions guide the research and influence the data. However, during the course of the research, important information may be discovered that was not originally considered. The researcher can then change the research questions to follow the newly discovered patterns, recognizing that a closer look may yield more than one interpretation of the picture/text. The findings, which are usually shown as numbers or percentages, may then be looked at to see if they can be applied to another setting. The coding and analysis process can be evaluated using four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. As an assessment, these criteria are comparable to validity and reliability (White & Marsh, 2006).

2.7 Content Analysis and Picture Books

Content analysis has been used to describe the content of children's books since Martin's landmark study of nationalism in 1934. It provides researchers with a method to objectively describe the content of books that have been systematically selected. Since the 1960s, one area of concern that has been studied in some depth is racial and ethnic groups. Character portrayals of races and nationalities, ethnic identification of characters, and ethnic groups have been studied in books that were written as early as 1920. Bekkedal (1973) stated that many of these studies 'could better be described as descriptive bibliographies than content analysis' (p. 116).

In 1970, Bingham analyzed the content of illustrations to investigate the treatment of Blacks in picture books. She used physical characteristics of the people, environments pictured, roles of Black adults, and the interaction of

characters. Gast analyzed five groups in 1965 using physical traits as one marker to identify stereotypes. Elkin's 1967 study, which included all Newbery and Caldecott winners to date, classified each character by ethnic group. By 1973, Bekkedal's research included racial and/or ethnic identification of the main character(s) and physical setting (Bekkedal, 1973).

Great changes have taken place since the studies of the 1960s and 1970s. Parents, politicians, and pundits recognize the importance of children's literature, specifically picture books that offer children, whether they can read or not, an opportunity to see themselves and others. Thirty-seven (37) picture books were recommended by *Young Children* in 1954. By 1994, nine hundred four (904) books were recommended. Picture books occupy a prominent place in America's classrooms, school libraries, public libraries, bookstores, and homes. Do they give our children an honest and accurate portrayal of themselves and others? Content analysis can help answer that question by accurately assessing racial/ethnic representation in books. As Nancy Larrick pointed out in 1965, if children do not see honest and accurate portrayals of themselves in picture books, they become 'invisible' (Mendoza & Reese, 2008).

The methodology that follows outlines how the picture book collection at the Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library was examined to determine if it reflects the diversity of its students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

All the picture books located in the easy-to-read (primary) collection at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary Library were examined. Both hard cover and paperbacks were included. Books about animals, fantasies, alphabets, counting or any other topic whose focus is not characters that could be encountered in real-life situations were not included.

3.2 Procedure

Content analysis was used to identify the ethnicities of the main characters and the settings of the picture book collection at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library. Although other data were collected, the analysis was restricted to the main characters and settings due to time constraints. It was a useful method for collection development purposes because it allowed the books to be examined and evaluated for numerous constructs.

The research was conducted using a coding form to record the title of the book, the main character by ethnicity, the setting by geographic location, the author and illustrator by color (yes or no), and the publisher by name and location. The character who was the main focus of the text was identified as the main character. If uncertainties existed, the main character was determined by the number of times his/her picture appeared. Data were compiled in an Excel

spreadsheet. Charts were used to show the distribution of the main characters by ethnic groups and the setting by geographic location.

The ethnicity of the main character was determined by using the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication (CIP) Subject Data. If this information was not available, the book was examined for ethnic markers, using text and picture clues. Text clues included the introduction, book jacket, and actual text of the book. Picture clues included the book covers and the illustrations inside the book. Ethnic markers included, but were not limited to, reference to ancestors, race/physical characteristics, culture/customs, language, religion, and common values (IUPUI University Library, 2007).

More specifically, the text was examined for (1) a foreign language/dialect, (2) religious references, (3) family, street, place, and business names, (4) words on buildings, signs, and wall murals, (5) the names of legends, songs, and holidays, and (6) the names of clubs and dances. The illustrations were examined for (1) the main character's skin color, hair texture, and facial features, i.e. eyelid folds, (2) flags and flag colors, (3) wall murals, drawings, and paintings, (4) the architecture of homes, churches, and businesses, (4) clothing, (5) musical instruments, and (6) festival and holiday paraphernalia. In one case, when the main character's ethnicity could not be determined using ethnic markers, the author was contacted by email. A similar procedure, using applicable markers when necessary, was used to identify the setting of the book.

4 Results

Forty-eight (48) picture books in the easy-to-read (primary collection) at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library met the criteria outlined above. Each book was examined and the data were recorded in an Excel Spreadsheet.

R1. What percentage of the picture books has one or more main characters that represent people of color?

To determine how accurately the picture books in the easy-to-read collection at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library reflect the children of color in the school population, the books that met the criteria were listed in the first column of an Excel spreadsheet. The second, third, and fourth columns addressed the ethnicity of the authors, illustrators, and main characters. They were labeled 'Author of Color', 'Illustrator of Color', and 'Ethnicity of Main Character', respectively. Authors and illustrators of color were identified only by 'yes' or 'no'.

The ethnicity of the main characters was determined by the ethnic markers described in the procedural section of the methodology. As indicated in Table 1, twenty-two main characters (46%) were White, twenty-one main characters (44%) were Black (not Hispanic), two main characters (4%) were Hispanic, two main characters (4%) were Jewish, and one (2%) was Asian. Therefore, twenty-six main characters (54%) represented people of color.

Group	Frequency	Percentage
White	22	46%
Black (not Hispanic)	21	44%
Hispanic	2	4%
Jewish	2	4%
Asian	1	2%

Table 1. Distribution of Main Characters by Ethnicity

R2. What ethnicities do the main characters of color represent?

The ethnicities of the main characters are important because the picture book collection should reflect the diversity of the students in the school. They should not only see honest portrayals of themselves, but also other racial and ethnic groups in their school as well as society at large. The main characters were identified by ethnic markers described in the procedural section of the methodology. A category of ‘Other’, with space to write in the ethnicity, was included to ensure that no ethnic group would be excluded. As indicated in Table 1, twenty-two main characters (46%) were White, twenty-one main characters (44%) were Black (not Hispanic), two main characters (4%) were Hispanic, two main characters (4%) were Jewish, and one (2%) was Asian.

R3. What percentage of the picture books has one or more main characters of color and is set in the Caribbean?

It is important that students in the Caribbean have access to picture books that reflect their ethnic identity, which includes their geographic locale. Therefore, the fifth column of the Excel spreadsheet addresses the setting of the story. It was labeled ‘Setting’. Children need to see picture books whose geographic location is the same as theirs; so that they know that their region of the world, their place in the world, has value. The coding form identified major areas of the world, but also had an ‘Other’ category to ensure that all regions would be included. As indicated in Table 2, forty-two books (88%) were set in the United States. Three books (6%) were set in Europe, two (4%) were set in the Caribbean, one (2%) was set in Africa, and one (2%) in Asia. The geographic location of one book was divided equally between the United States and Asia. Hence, the disparity in the ‘Frequency’ and ‘Percentage’ columns in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Setting by Country

Country	Frequency	Percentage
United States	42	88%
Europe	3	6%
Caribbean	2	4%
Asia	1	2%
Africa	1	2%

R4. What percentage of the picture books has one or more main characters of color and is set in Africa?

Children of color in the Caribbean should not only have access to picture books whose main characters reflect their ethnic identity and their setting, but books that honestly and accurately reflect their heritage. Since the majority of the students at Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School are the descendants of slaves, picture books depicting Africa should be available. Only one picture book (2%) had an African setting and a main character of color.

5. Discussion

The Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Library had 48 picture books in its easy-to-read (primary) collection that met the study's criteria. Since the collection numbers just over five hundred books, slightly less than ten percent of the books most frequently selected by kindergarten through 3rd grade students depict realistic stories. Of those, only fifty-four (54%) percent had main characters of color. Although forty-four (44%) percent of the main characters were Black, only four (4%) percent were Hispanic.

A disparity exists between the actual ethnicities represented by the school population and those depicted in the picture book collection. Forty-six (46%) percent of the books have main characters that are white, while just three (3%) percent of the student population is white. Although thirty-three (33%) percent of the school population is Hispanic, only four (4%) percent of the picture books have Hispanic main characters. The majority of students (64%), who are black, are only represented in forty-four (44%) percent of the picture books. Furthermore, there was only one book with a Haitian main character and none with an Arab main character; two small, but growing, minorities.

Unfortunately, there is also a disproportionate percentage (88%) of books that are set in the United States. Only four (4%) percent of the books had Caribbean locales and two (2%) percent African. It should be noted that there were only two (2) books set in the Caribbean; one in the Dominican Republic, the other

Haiti. There were no picture books with Middle Eastern settings; the historic homeland and birthplace of some Arab students.

If picture books have become the 'genre of choice' for teachers to read aloud and students to read independently as Mendoza and Reese (2001) assert, then it is important that the disparities mentioned above are addressed in a timely fashion. Picture books are powerful! They can not only influence a child's self-esteem, but also their view of others. Since only a small percentage of the books published each year represent minority cultures, it is often left up to school and public librarians to ensure that minorities are accurately represented in their picture book collections.

Instead of relying on traditional journals for book selection, that may or may not fairly represent minority cultures; librarians need to seek out journals that support and publicize authentic and accurate portrayals of minorities. Collections need to be developed that offer a broad range of quality picture books about numerous cultures, never relying on one book to depict a culture regardless of the accolades it has received. Librarians have a responsibility to make informed and objective judgments about the picture books they purchase. They are also responsible for what is already on their shelves.

6. Conclusion

This study examined picture books in an elementary school library on the island of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. While some of the findings may shed light on other picture book collections in the Virgin Islands, its findings are limited. Future studies may wish to examine several elementary school libraries on each of the three main islands (St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas) to identify how well their collections reflect the ethnicities of their students. Collectively, they may provide information that is representative of elementary school library picture book collections in the Virgin Islands, enhancing the collection development ability of not only individual librarians, but also territorial coordinators.

Studies reporting the effects of picture books on children's self-esteem and their perception of other cultures suggest that just as accurate and authentic portrayals can have positive lasting effects on their readers, inaccurate portrayals can negatively affect readers. If this statement is accepted at face value, the challenge then becomes to identify books that not only reflect the ethnicities of the students, but also offer accurate information from an insider's perspective. Mendoza and Reese (2001) suggested that those charged with the responsibility of selecting picture books should:

- identify and peruse journals that critique the cultural accuracy and authenticity of the books they review,
- purchase an adequate number of books for each ethnic group,
- select award winning books about people of color, written by people of color,

- acknowledge personal biases,
- seek out, listen to, and act on the valid concerns and criticisms of others during the selection process, and
- examine the text and illustrations in each book for accuracy.

Although school librarians' abilities to make informed judgments about picture books vary, those that accept the challenge and develop a selection criteria to root out bias and stereotyping will develop collections that reflect the ethnicities of their students, build self-esteem, and accurately celebrate the people of the world.

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