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What's the Story? A Qualitative Content Analysis of Ethnic Minority Characters in Canadian

Children's Books From 1980-2010

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#### Abstract

Children's books are fundamental in the socialization and development of children, and it is for this reason it is essential for children's books to be analyzed as a way of understanding the social meaning embedded in the literary content. This study explores the under researched area of Canadian children's books, and it seeks to describe the representation of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's literature. This study is based on a qualitative content analysis of 36 ethnic minority characters in 11 Canadian picture books. The findings suggest few Canadian children's books explicitly state the ethnicity of characters but rather imply ethnicity using various physical characteristics, dialogue, or surroundings. The findings also recognize a shift occurred in the 1990s, as the experiences of ethnic minorities began to be portrayed in children's books. The diversity of ethnic minority characters represented in Canadian children's literature increased over the thirty year span analyzed. The article concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the research and acknowledges more research needs to be conducted in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the depiction of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's picture books and the effect of this representation on minority members which cannot be determined from the present study.

What's the Story? A Qualitative Content Analysis of Ethnic Minority Characters in Canadian Children's Books from 1980 to 2010

Children's books are a fundamental influence in the lives of children around the world, as these stories depict experiences which resonate with young readers. However, Canadian children's literature, similar to other information mediums, is constructed in relation to the broader sociopolitical context of the nation and thus stories that do not reflect the opinions, beliefs, and experiences of the majority of citizens may be underrepresented or omitted completely. The present study seeks to understand the representation of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's literature from 1980-2010 by conducting a qualitative content analysis. The study is valuable as all children deserve the opportunity to see their lives reflected in children's stories, free from stereotypes and negative assumptions.

Scholars have examined children's literature since the 1930s and over the decades different topics have formed the basis of their analysis (Chukhray, 2010, p. 10). Chukhray (2010) notes, researchers who conducted early analysis of children's books did not consider the content of the stories but rather the structure and whether or not the books included images (p. 10). Nonetheless society became increasingly concerned with equality and human rights during the 1950s and 1960s, and scholars devoted their attention to the representation of minority groups in children's literature (Chukhray, 2010, p. 10). Hence as public perception gradually shifted towards inclusivity and acceptance, researchers in turn shifted their analysis of children's books to the portrayal of "gender or racial biases" (Chukhray, 2010, p. 11). Chukhray (2010) explains that although researchers have dedicated more time to the analysis of the representation of minority groups in children's literature, the majority of scholars utilize quantitative methods to observe racial biases, and they primarily focus on the depiction and occurrence of African American characters in children's literature. The prominent use of quantitative methods produces a limited explanation of the representation of minority groups in children's literature; hence the present study applies a qualitative approach as a means of

developing a fuller understanding of the portrayal of ethnic minority characters in children's books.

The majority of research regarding children's literature examines books written and published in the United States of America (USA), leading to a research gap in the assessment of Canadian children's literature. Children's books shape the national identity of a country (Schmidt, 2013, p. 33) and for this reason it is crucial for scholars to examine the portrayal of minority groups in Canadian children's books. Richter (2011) describes how Canadian children's literature has evolved since the 1950s, as the country has gradually progressed from a national model of assimilation to the current model which, some argue, emphasizes multiculturalism (p. 293). Richter's (2011) study explores the development of multiculturalism in Canadian fictional novels, targeted at teenage readers, noting a predominant ideological change occurred after the introduction of Trudeau's "White Paper on multiculturalism" in 1969 (p. 293). Nevertheless, researchers, such as Becker (1973), criticize whether children's books in fact reflect multiculturalism, as stories produced in capitalist nations, such as Canada and the USA, are constructed in countries founded on the basis of colonialism and depend on the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. As a result, it can be argued the stories produced in Canada are inherently "embedded in capitalism" and consequently reflect only the dominant values of society (Becker, 1973, p. 295). The contemporary debate surrounding children's literature has thus become less quantitatively focused and more qualitatively driven, as scholars evaluate the amount of "cultural authenticity" (Short & Fox, 2003, p. 3) depicted in children's literature.

The analogies of a "melting pot" (Raina, 2009, p. 29) or a cultural "mosaic" (Richter, 2011, p. 297) have been used to describe the sociopolitical context of Canada and the USA, and these analogies have been adapted to analyze children's literature as a means of describing the level of "cultural authenticity" (Short & Fox, 2003, p. 3) exhibited by these literary works. Short and Fox (2003) emphasize there is no simple definition for "cultural authenticity" (p.

3), as it is a very complex topic. Short and Fox(2003) explain, the most common definition of "cultural authenticity" is one that embraces "the reader's sense of truth in how a specific cultural experience has been represented within a book, particularly when the reader is an insider to the culture being portrayed" (p. 5). Nonetheless, Short & Fox (2003) provide several alternative definitions in their book. One definition, coined by Howard, reflects the "universality of experience" (p. 5), which allows readers from both inside and outside the depicted culture to recognize "cultural authenticity" in children's literature, as "readers from the culture will know that [the representation] is true, will identify, and be affirmed, and readers from another culture will feel that it is true, will identify, and learn something of value " (p. 5). It is important to acknowledge that by no means does "cultural authenticity" imply all individuals from a given culture are identical or experience life in the same way, but "cultural authenticity" (p. 5) highlights the shared values and beliefs individuals of a given culture accept as a whole (Short & Fox, 2011, p. 5). A fundamental argument regarding "cultural authenticity" (Short & Fox, 2011, p. 5) is that of "insider" versus "outsider" perspectives and whether authors as well as illustrators have the right to detail experiences of people outside their own culture and, if so, can these stories be considered culturally authentic? In their edited book Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature, Short and Fox (2011) feature a variety of perspectives on the issue of "cultural authenticity" (p. 5) and delve deeper into why the insider/outsider dichotomy is simplistic and problematic in the discussion of "cultural authenticity" (p. 5) in children's literature. Regardless of one's definition of "cultural authenticity" (p. 5), it is essential that all children are able to see themselves depicted in children's books and are able to feel a sense of truth in the experiences portrayed (Short & Fox, 2011, p. 21). As a result, it continues to be imperative for researchers to evaluate children's literature as a means of promoting equality and inclusivity amongst all children.

As a researcher, it has been important for me to reflect on my ontological position, the beliefs I have constructed about the social reality in which my life is embedded as well as to use

reflexivity, the constant questioning of my own personal biases throughout the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 13). I do not belong to an ethnic minority group; thus, I had to understand why I wanted to conduct a study about the representation of ethnic minority characters, and I needed to discover what shared experience connected me to these people. I realized this commonality was education, and I came to this conclusion by writing in a research journal during the entire study as well as reflecting on literature regarding cultural authenticity. Since attending university, my ontological perspective has become increasingly grounded in "postmodernism," whereby the construction of the social world is grounded in discourses of power (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 27). The use of education as a function of the Canadian "ideological state apparatus," defined by Althusser (1971) as the State agencies that ensure the subordinate class accepts the rule of the dominant class (p. 6), is a topic that intrigues me. The significance for children from all ethnic origins to be able to see themselves and their life experiences portrayed in children's books became increasing evident as I gathered data at the local library and watched children from various ethnicities share in the experience of reading. I fondly remembered reading books as a young child or having books read to me, and I asked myself how these children might feel if they were never able to relate to the characters depicted in the books before them.

As the majority of scholars have focused on American authored books, the present study aims to reduce the research gap by concentrating on the depiction of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's literature. The current study contributes to the limited body of qualitative research, as it seeks an in depth understanding of the representations of ethnic minority characters. The study was guided by a set of questions regarding the roles played by ethnic minority characters, and whether Canadian children's picture books feature a diverse variety of ethnic minority groups, and if the representations were detailed or vague. Utilizing a qualitative framework, the study outlines three prevalent themes that emerged from the data collection process and analysis of 36 characters from various ethnic minority groups. The purpose of the

present study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of how ethnic minority characters are portrayed in Canadian children's picture books from 1980 to 2010 and whether the representation of ethnic minority characters in these books has changed over thirty years.

#### Methods

As previously mentioned the purpose of the current study is to obtain a fuller understanding of how ethnic minority characters are depicted in Canadian children's literature, hence the study first explores the under researched area of Canadian children's books, and it seeks to describe the portrayals of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's literature. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) explain "exploratory" and "descriptive" (p. 10) research are two main purposes of qualitative studies, emphasizing the intent of both methods is to "unearth and understand meaning" (p. 12). Therefore the study aims to uncover the social meanings attributed to the representation of ethnic minority characters in children's books. For the purpose of the study, ethnic minority refers to "a group within a community which has different national or cultural traditions from the main population" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.) and stereotype is defined as the unfair belief "that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). Multiculturalism, in this study, is defined as the integration of content in society that reflects the lived experiences of various minority group members (Short & Fox, 2003, p. 7). Please note, the terms, represented, depicted and portrayed are used interchangeably throughout the study.

The method of content analysis is well suited for investigating the representation of ethnic minorities in children's picture books, as content analysis allows for the examination and comparison of patterns and themes in children's stories that have been produced within given eras. As described by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), we "learn about our society by investigating the material items produced within it" (p. 227); therefore the current qualitative study strives to develop a rich understanding of the representation of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's books by utilizing the content analysis method.

As the present study employs the unobtrusive method of content analysis which relies on "noninteractive data" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, 228) and does not require any human participants, ethical considerations are minimal. However the "moral integrity" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 59) of the researcher is a primary ethical consideration for a study that uses content analysis, and it is the researcher's duty throughout the study to ensure the integrity, credibility, reliability or dependability, and the validity of the study are protected. Golafshani (2003) explains the difference in terminology for qualitative studies when referring to reliability and validity in comparison to quantitative studies, noting reliability in qualitative research may be better referred to as "dependability" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). Qualitative studies tend to focus more on the "trustworthiness" of research through the use of "inquiry audit[s]" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601), rather than the quantitative objective of exact study replication. An "inquiry audit" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601) is the process whereby the dependability of a study is maximized by reviewing the research procedures and findings for consistency, consequently increasing the dependability of the research and credibility of the researcher. Validity, as described by Golafshani (2003), "is not a single, fixed or universal concept, but rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects" (p. 602); hence validity is interrelated to the "quality, rigor, and trustworthiness" (p. 602) of the research and the researcher, and the goal of validity, no matter the definition, is to increase the level of confidence in the findings. A fundamental method for maintaining validity is for the researcher to be reflexive at all stages of the qualitative research process. The practice of "reflexivity is the awareness that all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 38). Reflexivity is frequently used by researchers to assess the interrelationship of one's own biases and the research process in order to acknowledge the context in which information is developed. As a means of guaranteeing ethical research, the study will note the ways ethical integrity has been maintained, and the study will address its limitations in the discussion section.

Before collecting the sample, it is integral for the researcher to note any previous biases or underlying assumptions regarding the topic as a means of maintaining transparency, accountability, and dependability as well as to be "holistic" or aware of the relationship between one's personal beliefs and research process at all steps of the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 13). My initial assumptions, noted prior to conducting the study, are as follows: I am critical of whether a variety of ethnic minority characters will be featured in Canadian children's literature; although I expect to find some progression over time with ethnic minority characters occurring more frequently in recent publications. I anticipate most Canadian children's stories will feature a Caucasian protagonist with characters of various ethnic minorities playing secondary roles or even portrayed as the antagonist. I do not expect much detail will be given to identifying the specific ethnic minority groups in the stories.

The sample for the study was generated using purposive sampling techniques. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) describe "purposive sampling" as the process of selecting a sample based on the research question as well as taking into account the availability of resources for the researcher (p. 45). Therefore, specific sampling criteria are outlined prior to collecting the sample itself. The inclusion criteria for the sample are as follows: the children's books must be written by a Canadian author and published from 1980-2010, the books must be illustrated as the study concentrates on the depiction of ethnic minority characters in children's picture books, the books must be suited for children three to eight years of age, and the books must feature an ethnic minority group. The sample generated is one of "stratified purposive sampling" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 46), as the sample was selected to meet the sampling criteria and reflect certain characteristics of the sample population, such as a variety of ethnic minority groups, the portrayal of ethnic minorities in different character roles as well as an equal number of books selected from each decade. The ideal sample included four books from each decade that met the sampling criteria.

Once the inclusion criteria for the sample was identified, the sample was obtained from children's books available at the Cloverdale Library, Surrey British Columbia. In order to ensure "validity" or the trustworthiness of the sample (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 48), the final sample was generated from a complete list of Canadian children's books available at the Cloverdale library June 10, 2014. The sample is limited, as books that were out on loan at the time of collection were not included in the complete list of Canadian children's books and, consequently, not included in the sample (see Appendix A for the complete list of Canadian children's books generated from the children's section of the Cloverdale library). During the collection of books for the overall list of available titles, the title, author, publication year and any representation of ethnic minority group was noted. Any books that exclusively featured nonhuman characters were omitted because one cannot identify the ethnicity of non-human characters. Also, fairy tale stories were excluded because these stories have typically evolved over centuries and hence the original date of origin is difficult to determine. The complete book list includes titles that feature no ethnic minority representation. The rationale for noting books without ethnic minority characters was to prepare for the event where there was not a sufficient amount of books that described and illustrated the portrayal of ethnic minority characters alone: had this occurred, the research question could be revised to compare the representation of ethnic and non-ethnic characters. I consulted with the librarian regarding popular Canadian children's books. Although the information was not particularly helpful, she did identify books written by Robert Munsch have been admired by generations of children. The complete book list was then organized by year (see Appendix B) and four books from each decade were selected based on the previously identified inclusion criteria. Unfortunately, only three books from the 1980s were included in the final sample, as it was a challenge to find books that were written by different authors and that represented a variety of ethnic minority characters. The original sample included The Paper Bag Princess (1980), a book with no ethnic minority characters, as a means of comparison, yet it was later excluded, as it did not meet the original selection

criteria. Appendix C provides a table of the books selected for the sample. In total, 11 children's books were reviewed with 36 ethnic minority characters analyzed. Although the sample size is relatively small, it is reflective of the goal of collecting in-depth information in qualitative research rather than generalizing the findings to a larger population as is the goal in quantitative research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 45).

After the compilation of the sample, the data collection process ensued. It is important to note the research process in a qualitative content analysis is inductive rather than the deductive approach used in quantitative analysis. The inductive approach allows the researcher to move back and forth between the construction of research questions, data collection, and data analysis. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) explain the inductive process as the "spiral model of research design" used by qualitative researchers, and Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) compare the spiral model to the linear model employed by quantitative researchers (p. 234) as a way illustrating the "diving in and out" (p. 236) of data qualitative researchers engage in (see Appendix D for a visual comparison of the spiral and linear research models).

Since qualitative research involves moving back and forth between data collection, data analysis and data interpretation, Chenail (1997) emphasizes the importance of keeping one's research aligned or "plumb" (p. 1). The "qualitative research plumb line" (p. 3) as described by Chenail (1997) consists of four components: area of curiosity, mission question, data to be collected, and data analysis procedure. By clearly defining these four components early on in the study, the research will remain focused and sound. Applying Chenail's (1997) model, an illustration of the qualitative plumb line for the present study follows:

- Area of Curiosity The representation of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's books
- Research Question(s) How are ethnic minority characters portrayed in Canadian children's books from 1980 to 2010? How has the representation of ethnic minority characters changed over thirty years?
- Data Collected Eleven children's books featuring ethnic minority characters (descriptions of demographic information and character roles noted)
- Data Analysis Qualitative content analysis

As the qualitative process is inductive, the data collection process occurred at several points. First, data were collected from the 11 books included in the final sample. The data were comprised of textual quotes and descriptions of the images in the books. At this point, the research question was restructured to focus on the roles played ethnic characters. However, the research question was eventually changed back to the original question, how are ethnic minority characters represented in Canadian children's books from 1980-2010? And whether the representation of ethnic minority characters in these books has changed over thirty years? By reinstating the original research question, the representation of ethnic minority characters was not strictly limited to character roles. After the initial compilation of data, "analysis memos" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 221) were added to the data as a way of making sense of the meaning attributed to the words and illustrations in the books. At this point, it was necessary to clarify what factors attribute to the representation of ethnic minority characters, such as demographic characteristics, and these characteristics were noted in the data for each ethnic minority character.

The demographic information identified in the data became initial descriptive codes. Descriptive codes explained by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) are the "codes within data that are discovered during the data analysis process and can eventually be used to generate a set of key concepts which are more analytical" (p. 330). Four descriptive codes were initially identified, and a definition of each code was created as a means of ensuring consistency and dependability during the coding process: age – how old the character is explicitly said to be or, if unknown, how is the character's age inferred; ethnicity – cultural practices, beliefs or traits that distinguish a group of people from the greater Canadian population; gender – male or female depictions or unknown; and language – a term or phrase in a language other than English or reference to speaking a language other than English. During the coding process, it became evident many books in the sample did not explicitly identify specific characteristics; therefore codes had to be constructed in a way that allowed for unknown and implicit features. When

characteristics were inferred from the data, it was imperative to clearly identify how and why these inferences were made as a means of demonstrating dependability and validity. The fifth code, location - the country or city the story takes place; was added after the initial coding process, therefore the data were re-analyzed. The category of ethnicity consists of two subcategories: explicit - direct reference to ethnicity, culture or country of origin is made; and implicit/unknown – no direct mention of character's ethnic background, but there may be features present that assist the reader in inferring the character's ethnicity. The category of gender consists of three subcategories: male, female, and unknown. By reviewing, the data again a sixth descriptive code was identified, the role played by each ethnic minority character how important the character is to the story and their position in the book overall. The category of character role includes four subcategories: primary/main characters - the narrator or center of the story who may solve a problem of some kind; secondary characters - help the flow of the story and may help the primary character with the problem encountered; background characters no interaction with the main or secondary characters; and antagonists – causes a problem or challenge for the primary/main character. The subcategory of background characters was often difficult to code, as background characters tended to be groups of ethnic minority characters compared to individual characters; hence, it was important to identify when an overall group was being described in the data. In total, 32 individual ethnic characters and four groups of ethnic characters were examined. If I were to repeat the study, I would focus only on individual characters. However, the groups of ethnic minority characters in the present study made up a large portion of the background characters, providing support for the inclusion of these characters. The data were colour coded and transferred into an Excel sheet respectively (see Appendix E for code key).

Analytical codes were generated by grouping and re-grouping coded data to uncover common trends or themes. A "focused coding procedure" was used to clarify and compare concepts. "Focused coding" allows the researcher to move from descriptive codes to analytical

categories that are more abstract (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p. 311) For example, data were grouped by character role in order to get a sense for the distribution of ethnic minority characters across roles. The data were re-grouped by gender, individual or group of characters and ethnicity – implicit / explicit. The data that described ethnicity, including implicit and explicit indicators, were re-grouped to get a sense of the variety of ethnicities portrayed in the data. The research question asked whether the portrayal of ethnic minority characters changed from 1980-2010; therefore, the data were grouped by decade and previously identified codes were used to recognize any overarching features of each decade that related to the research question. Themes began to emerge from the focused coding process, such as the ethnicities of the characters were rarely explicitly stated, there was a greater variety of ethnic groups in recent children's books, and specific cultural experiences of minority groups began to be portrayed in the 1990s (see Appendix F for visual interpretations of data). The primary emerging themes were further reduced through interpretation, expressed by reflexive memos in a research journal that questioned the importance of the patterns. Three central themes emerged that assist in explaining the representation of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's picture books from 1980-2010.

#### Findings

The reduction and analysis of data allowed three main themes to be identified that provide a glimpse into the representation of ethnic minority characters in Canadian children's books from 1980-2010. The three key themes represent the findings of the qualitative content analysis and are as follows: ethnicity in Canadian children's books is most often expressed implicitly, through the character's physical features, clothing, surroundings or dialogue; Canadian children's books in the 1990s began to address important issues affecting ethnic minority groups; and the ethnic diversity of characters in Canadian children's books increased

from 1980-2010, although typically only expressed implicitly. The findings are discussed in the following sections.

#### **Ethnicity Expressed Implicitly**

The ethnicity of characters was not usually explicitly stated in the stories. Only two of the eleven books reviewed explicitly stated the ethnicity of any of the characters, rather the majority of the books implied ethnicity by the characters' physical features, clothing, surroundings or dialogue. The vagueness in addressing the ethnicity of characters in children's stories tends to direct the reader's attention towards the similarities among characters rather than differences. Nevertheless, by using vague visual features or descriptions, these books may contribute to the formation of stereotypes and the negative assumption that all members of a particular ethnic group look and behave the same way. The ethnicity of a character could often only be implied by the skin tone and other physical features in the illustration. The illustrated appearances of characters are likely to perpetuate stereotypes when physical features are exaggerated, as occurred in *The King's Taster*, where the Cook's hands and facial features are over emphasized (see Appendix G for illustration) or when characters appear visually similar to other members of the ethnic minority group, as was the case in *A Promise is a Promise*, where Allashua's brother's appear almost identical besides a difference in age which is indicated through height (see Appendix H for illustration).

Becker (1973) contests, most children's literature in Western nations is "sloppily composed" (p. 295) and does not accurately portray characters of colour, leading to stereotypical notions. The careless composition of children's stories by some authors and illustrators becomes apparent when unique cultures, such as various Canadian Aboriginal cultures, are portrayed as singular ethnic groups with identical traditions and beliefs. Two examples of "pan-indianism," the process where the traditions and beliefs of First Nations peoples are generalized in society rather than acknowledged as being specific to different regional groups (Howard, 1983, p. 71), are identified in the study. First, the characters Granny

and Grandad in *Silas' Seven Grandparents* are depicted as Aboriginal characters based on their tan reddish skin, narrow eyes and reference to attending a pow wow, along with illustrations of them in front of totem poles. Granny always has her hair in braids and is usually wearing a hat with an eagle feather. She also wears jade coloured jewellery, a long skirt and a shirt with tassels. Grandad has broad shoulders and wears a large cowboy hat with a jade accent piece on the front as well as a plaid shirt and jeans. While all the other characters' clothing changes during the story, Granny and Grandad's clothing remains unchanged throughout the book, implicitly emphasizing their ethnicity (see Appendix I for illustration).

The specific ethnicity of Allashua's family in A Promise is a Promise is not explicitly referenced, although it can be inferred they belong to an Aboriginal group in Northern Canada from their tan yellowish skin, long dark hair and vast icy surroundings. The story references a mythical creature called Quallupilluit who steals children who play on the sea ice, subsequently highlighting the ethnicity of the characters and their traditional beliefs. The final illustration in A Promise is a Promise provides a small clue into the location of Allashua's family, a tiny polar bear symbol on Father's hat. The polar bear is the symbol for the North West Territories of Canada, yet it does not confirm the ethnicity of Allashua's family (see Appendix J for illustration). It is important to note, I have taken two courses on Aboriginal people in Canada, and therefore it is likely I may recognize cultural customs specific to certain regions more easily than the average reader; however, by no means am I an expert on Aboriginal cultures and misinterpretations can occur. The neglect to recognize specific Aboriginal cultural traditions as unique is dangerous as these assumptions stem from the colonial history of Canada, and these stereotypes are subsequently disseminated through generations by the seemingly harmless generalizations in children's picture books. As mentioned by Raina (2009), even the best intended author may portray an ethnic group in a way that is "unacceptable to the people of that culture" (p. 45), but it necessary for authors and illustrators to consider their sociopolitical

positions and take the necessary steps to ensure they respect cultural differences when they depict people of various ethnicities in order to prevent generalizations and ethnic stereotypes.

1990s Canadian Children's Books Address Experiences Unique to Ethnic Minority

Groups

Emphasizing the progression of Canada's multicultural identity during the 1990s, a noticeable shift in the type of stories being told in children's books published in the 1990s is identified in the study. Half of the books in the 1990s sub-set illustrated experiences specific to the lives of immigrants. Flags detailed a story of the historical encampment of the Japanese people in Canada during the Second World War. Mr. Hiroshi is a Japanese neighbour of the child protagonist, and he is ordered to leave his home because of the war. Mr. Hiroshi eloquently states, "it's strange, I was born in this country." His simple words depict the sense of betrayal felt by many Japanese people after the war. Other pieces of text capture the feeling of loneliness and isolation felt by the Japanese people as they were removed from their homes with some sent to Japan, even if they were born in Canada, The protagonist, a young girl, sits with Mr. Hiroshi in his garden the night before he must leave. They look across the ocean and the girl thinks to herself, "Japan lay[s] there a world away." The girl's humble statement emphasizes the cultural division among Canadian citizens during World War II. The following day as she says good-bye to Mr. Hiroshi, the protagonist notices the faces of the Japanese people aboard the bus are "stiff with sadness." The textual representation presents the loss of identity suffered by Japanese Canadians during the war due to repressive government policies. Stories that portray cultural oppression in a sensitive manner allow the challenges and long term effects confronted by specific minority groups to be expressed and potential strategies for overcoming the challenges may also be detailed as a means of demonstrating resilience (Clark & Fink, 2004, p. 115).

From Far Away was published in the 1990s, and it depicts the experience of a young girl who is an immigrant/refugee, as her family was forced out of their war torn country. The number

of international wars in the 1990s contributed to an increase of immigrant and refugee claims in Canada, and it was pleasantly surprising to find a children's book that shares the lived experience of one child who was traumatized by war and required to relocate to Canada. Saoussan, the primary/main, character never states her ethnicity, but she does explain she "comes from far away" and "the place [she] used to live was very nice, [until] the war started." It is important to acknowledge my conceptual biases when I first analyzed From Far Away, as the mention of war led me to prematurely conclude the characters of this story were of Middle Eastern descent, yet I cannot truly know this from the representation of the characters in the story. Saoussan's mother wears a long gown and head veil throughout the story, further implying the family is from the Middle East or possibly Africa. Near the end of the story, Saoussan declares she will change her name to Susan because she likes Canada, but her mother tells her to change it back. The illustration that accompanies the textual description features Saoussan dressed in contemporary Canadian clothes, a colourful sweater and bright vellow skirt with tights and a pink head band, and her mother dressed in traditional clothes, a long plain coloured gown and head dress, facing off against each other with their hands on their hips (see Appendix K for illustration). The text paired with the illustration seems to demonstrate the sense of inner conflict shared by many immigrants and refugees, as they attempt to integrate into Canadian society while maintaining their cultural roots. Clark and Fink (2004) suggest stories, such as From Far Away, that are told in the first person "highlight the uniqueness of individual experience" (p. 114), as the characters overcome personal challenges which readers may relate. The representation of shared experiences amongst minority groups, such as oppression and immigration, in the 1990s is a key turning point in Canadian children's literature, as more attention is given to the minority characters' experiences, rather than limiting them to basic physical depictions.

#### The Ethnic Diversity of Characters Increased from 1980-2010

The coding and analysis of data portrayed an increase in the ethnic diversity of characters in Canadian children's books from 1980-2010, although ethnicity was typically implicit as previously discussed. The number of ethnic minority groups represented in Canadian children's books more than doubled from 1980-2010. The description of ethnic minority characters through illustrations and at times dialogue became more detailed in the 1990s, as the stories advanced from the basic physical representation of ethnic minority characters, predominant in the 1980s, with visual and textual illustrations of traditional clothing or reference to cultural practices, beliefs or language. It is crucial to consider the sociopolitical context in which the books were produced, as content analysis depends on "naturalistic" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 228) data that exist in the world apart from the current research being conducted. As the 1990s and 2000s were decades of increased immigration in Canada, it is reasonable to expect more diverse ethnic groups would be portrayed during these decades. Richter (2011) explains, the increase in multicultural children's books in recent decades demonstrates "multicultural life has come to be seen as so common to Canadian experience that it no longer needs to be treated explicitly" (p. 296). Richter's (2011) argument provides support for why more ethnicities are being portrayed in Canadian children's literature in recent years, and Richter (2011) notes it is the progression of Canada's national identity towards one of multiculturalism that has allowed the representation of ethnic characters to take implicit forms that, in most books, still capture the cultural experience without labeling the minority group.

The three central themes identified by the present qualitative study of Canadian children's books from 1980-2010 demonstrates ethnicity is rarely explicitly addressed but rather implied using physical characteristics, clothing, description of surroundings and dialogue. As the stories provide vague descriptions rather than explicit references to characters' ethnicities, one can draw two conclusions: first, by omitting explicit reference to a character's ethnicity, it is less likely the character will be labeled and therefore the story focuses its attention on the similarities

rather than differences of the characters. On the other hand, one can conclude that by not identifying the ethnicity of characters depicted in children's books, the readers are likely to make generalizations about different ethnic groups which could perpetuate stereotypes and negative assumptions. The central themes also acknowledge that as Canada's national identity shifted to multiculturalism, children's literature began to feature a greater variety of ethnic minorities, noting a significant shift occurred in the 1990s as more stories focused on the experience of ethnic minority characters than Canadian children's books had in the past.

#### Discussion and Conclusion

Although the ethnicity of characters in Canadian children's books from 1980-2010 is typically implicit, the research demonstrates the diversity of ethnic minority characters increased over the thirty year span examined and a fundamental shift occurred in the 1990s, whereby experiences unique to minority populations, such as immigration and historical oppression, began to appear in children's literary works. Nevertheless, the findings of the research are limited and more qualitative research on Canadian children's books is necessary to develop an in-depth understanding of how ethnic minority characters are represented in Canadian children's literature.

It must be noted that although half of the stories portrayed in the 1990s centered on experiences that are likely shared by ethnic minority members, this trend did not carry through into the 2000s with the exception of the *Good Garden*, which portrays the daily lives of a family of rural farmers who live in Honduras. Rather, the books published from 2000-2010 tend to revert back to simplistic character portrayals mostly based on stereotypical physical characteristics or negative assumptions. One book, *Silas' Seven Grandparents*, is an example of how cultural insensitivities can manifest themselves in children's literature when authors and illustrators are careless or not well informed. In *Silas' Seven Grandparents*, Granny, a character portrayed as an Aboriginal, is illustrated removing a green bottle from her purse (see Appendix L). Although the illustration seems innocent and the bottle is not explicitly labeled as alcohol, it is

a prime example of how one's own biases and assumptions, even those that are subconscious, infiltrate the work a person produces, and this example emphasizes the need for all people to be reflexive in their work, not only those who conduct qualitative research.

The study utilized a content analysis method which in itself is limited by the fact that the study is constrained to data that is already produced and in public domain. While content analysis is beneficial as the data are "naturalistic," which gives the data a unique form of authenticity as the research in unobtrusive (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 228), it is important to recognize data are constructed from a certain perspective and in a particular context; therefore, the researcher must be aware of the privileges of the recorder and understand that misrepresentations are possible. It must be acknowledged that it is impossible to draw conclusions from the current study regarding the effects of children's books on individuals or ethnic minority groups, as there was no interaction with human participants in order to understand the effect. The present study aimed to address the inherent limitations of content analysis by complementing the data with support from scholarly literature as well as reflecting on the sociopolitical context in which the content was produced. As discussed by Chenail (1995), the "juxtaposition" of data (p. 4) is imperative to guiding readers through the research process and improving the validity of the study hence juxtaposition was incorporated when presenting the findings.

The study is also limited by the sample collection methods, as the sample was based on the availability of titles at one library, and the study may not reflect the most popular children's stories because the sample was generated using stratified purposive sampling techniques. If the study was to be conducted again, I would establish more stringent sampling criteria and reduce the number of books in the sample, as I was surprised by the amount of ethnic minority characters in the sample selected.

Had time allowed, the validity and dependability of the study could have been improved through the use of "triangulation" methods (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 51). Triangulation

increases the validity of a study by using two or more research methods to answer a research question as a means of identifying consistencies in the data. The study would have benefitted from inter-rater coding and interpretation of the data as a means of strengthening the themes and protecting against misinterpretations. The present qualitative content analysis can be advanced by future qualitative interviews or ethnographic research that will allow researchers to develop a greater overall understanding of how the representations of ethnic minority characters affect minority group members, especially in the context of education and socialization of children.

There continues to be a gap in the qualitative analysis of Canadian children's literature and although the present study contributes to the body of research; it is necessary future research be conducted as a means of further uncovering the social truths embedded in children's literary works as well as developing a better understanding of how textual representations effect the socialization of children and what consequences are linked to careless misrepresentations of some ethnic minority groups.

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Appendix A

Total List of Canadian Children's Books Available

Canadian			
children's books			
Collected from			
Cloverdale Public			
Library June 10-12			
Title	Author	Year	*Ref to minority group / description
50 D I		Publication	
50 Below zero	Munsch	1986	
A pocket can have a treasure in it	K. Stinson	2008	
A promise is a promise	Munsch	1988	Main character Inuit in NWT
A second is a hiccup	H. Hutchins	2004	
A very unusual dog	Harris	2004	
Aboriginal carol	Bouchard	2008	FN also written in Wendai
Always run up the	Moore	2003	no skin colour
stairs			
Baby dreams	Fernandes	1999	Different families
Bagels from Benny	Davis	2003	
Bear hug	Oldland	2009	
Bella and bunny	Larsen	2007	skin colour of classmates
Big and small room for all	Bogart	2009	Asian child - no interaction between characters
Blue Hippo	Fitzgerald	2007	In Egypt
Boy in the drawer	Munsch	1986	
Buddha in garden	D. Bouchard	2001	In Asia - monks
Camels always do	Manuel	2004	
Canoe he called	Reid-	2010	FN
Loo Taas	Sterens		
Chubby, cuddly,	Allard	2012	Diff skin colour for people
hungry baby	\/	0044	
Cookiebot	Van camp	2011	
David's Father	Munsch	1983	Main character
Dino Dance	Heidbreder	2004	Black friend
Dragons I know	Ryan	2009	
Ella May and the wishing stone	Fagan	2011	Friends
Emily, Moonshine	Lansonius	1997	girl travels to see friend "land of the Inuit"

and sister goose			
Farley follows his nose	L. Johnson	2009	painter
Feathers	Framst	2004	
Flags	Trottier	1999	Asian neighbour Japanese removed from home
From Far Away	Munsch	1995	Main character an immigrant
Ghost train	Yee	1996	In S. China and NA
Good bye to Griffith street	Reynolds	2004	
Good families don't	Munsch	1990	police
Good Garden	Milway	2010	In Honduras
Good morning Sam	Gay	2003	
Good night world	# of FN authors	2012	FN
Gracie's baby chub chop	G. Johnson	2004	ref to timbucktwo
Grandma and the pirates	Gilman	1990	Conquest of world by pirates (one pg)
Harry & Horsie	Van camp	2009	
I am Raven	D. Bouchard	2007	FN
I miss Franklin P. Shuckles	Snihura	1998	Asian classmate
I want to go to the moon	Saunders	2011	friends at b-day party & army men
It's my room	Munsch	2012	
Jasper's day	Parker	2002	
Jenneli's Dance	Denny	2008	FN and difference w/ others
King's Taster	K. Oppel	2009	Cook is Black / king is a child
Lilly Loves	Luftner	2012	no skin colour
Littlest sled dog	Kusugak	2008	FN
Louis Tiger from the sea	Kozlowski	2011	
Mattland	H. Hutchins	2008	set of hands
Mattoo lets play	Luxbacher	2010	
Mechanimals	Tougas	2007	"waking people in China"
Millicent and the wind	Munsch	1984	makes friend at end with Black boy
Missuk's snow geese	Renaud	2008	Up North (not labelled FN)
Moira's Birthday	Munsch	1987	Different coloured classmates
Mom and Dad don't live together	K. Stinson	1984	

anymore			
Once upon a balloon	Galbraith	2013	
One Arabian morning	Marlowe	2000	some characters
One of us	Moss	2010	main character new at school
Our corner grocery store	Schwartz	2009	Italian store owners/ customers/ friends
Paper Bag Princess	Munsch	1980	
Peg and Yetti	K. Oppel	2004	
Perfect snow	Reid	2009	Students
Peter's pixie	Kushner	2003	Skin colour of peter? Neighbour?
Proud as a Peacock, brave as a lion	Barclay	2009	
Read the Story Stella	Gay	2013	
Ride'em Cowboy	Czernecki	2004	
Secret of the dance	Spalding	2006	FN
Shi-shi-etko	LaFave	2005	FN residential schools
Silas' 7 grandparents	Horrocks	2010	various grandparents
Silly chicken	Khan	2005	In Pakistan
Singingly skipping along	Fitch	2013	Various
Sir Cassie to the rescue	Smith	2003	
Soccer crazy	Tibo	2012	teammates
Sock wars	Christense n	2011	family darker skinned
Stella Princess of the Sky	Gay	2004	
Stella very small	Gay	2009	All "Stella" books have an image of a piece of paper with Asian writing - but no mention of minority groups
Swamp Water	Munsch	2013	
The Aunts come marching	Richardson	2007	different Aunts with instruments
The French Fry King	Roge	2012	Diff groups eating fries
The list	H. Hutchins	2007	
The Pancake express	Scott	2012	
The song within my heart	D. Bouchard	2002	FN

The west is calling	Harvey	2008	FN
Timmerman was here	Sydor	2009	
Together	H. Hutchins	2009	Various families
Two shoes, blue shoes, new shoes	Fitz-Gibbon	2002	darker skinned girl main character
Up Home	Grant	2008	Black family in Nova Scotia - historical reflection
Wendel & the great one	Leonetti	2008	skin colour of teammates
When you were small	O'Leary	2006	
Whimsy's Heavy Things	Kraulis	2013	Asian best friend @ end of book
Wishes	Little	2012	skin colours of friends

Appendix B

Total List of Canadian Children's Books Organized by Year of Publication

Title	Author	Year Publicatio n	*Ref to minority group/ description	J use in sample & why
1980's				
Paper Bag Princess	Munsch	1980		J B/C earliest written work - lack of available 1980's Canadian authored books
David's Father	Munsch	1983	Main character	J B/C main character is dark skinned interacting with new kid "David" (white) and his strange family
Millicent and the wind	Munsch	1984	makes friend at end with Black boy	
Mom and Dad don't live together anymore	K. Stinson	1984		OMIT B/C CAN ONLY ACCESS NEWER ED. WITH NES ILLUSTRATIONS
Jillian Jiggs	Gilan	1985	Rachel - Jillian's friends	J B/C one of few Canadian authors available besides Munsch & Jillian's friend is dark skinned
50 Below zero	Munsch	1986		
Boy in the drawer	Munsch	1986		
Moira's Birthday	Munsch	1987	Different coloured classmates	
A promise is a promise	Munsch	1988	Main character Inuit in NWT	J B/C main character Inuit - early portray of FN culture - compare to later works
1990's				
Grandma and the pirates	Gilman	1990	Conquest of world by pirates - not conversation w/ ethnic minority just illustration	J B/C brief visual description - no rep of ethnic minorities throughout the rest of the book (all other books in the 1990's have ethnic reps
Good families don't	Munsch	1990	police	
From Far Away	Munsch	1995	Main character an immigrant	J B/C interesting to see how an immigrant is represented - struggles discussed?
Ghost train	Yee	1996	In S. China and NA	
Emily, Moonshine and sister goose	Lansonius	1997	girl travels to see friend "land of the Inuit"	

I miss Franklin P. Shuckles	Snihura	1998	Asian classmate	
Baby dreams	Fernandes	1999	Different families	J B/C depiction of different families
Flags	Trottier	1999	Asian neighbour Japanese removed from home	J B/C it is situated in an era of discrimination - is this represented in the story - how is the minority group portrayed?
2000-2010				1 7
One Arabian morning	Marlowe	2000	some characters	
Buddha in garden	D. Bouchard	2001	In Asia - monks	
The song within my heart	D. Bouchard	2002	FN	
Two shoes, blue shoes, new shoes	Fitz- Gibbon	2002	Black girl main character	J B/C Black girl is main character (compared to representations in Munsch's 1980' book)
Jasper's day	Parker	2002		,
Bagels from Benny	Davis	2003		
Good morning Sam	Gay	2003		
Peter's pixie	Kushner	2003	Skin colour of peter? Neighbour?	
Always run up the stairs	Moore	2003	no skin colour	
Sir Cassie to the rescue	Smith	2003		
Ride'em Cowboy	Czernecki	2004		
Feathers	Framst	2004		
Stella Princess of the Sky	Gay	2004		
A second is a	H. Hutchins	2004		
hiccup Dino Dance	Heidbrede r	2004	Black friend	
A very unusual dog	Harris	2004		
Gracie's baby chub chop	G. Johnson	2004	ref to timbucktwo	
Camels always do	Manuel	2004		
Peg and Yetti	K. Oppel	2004		
Good bye to Griffith street	Reynolds	2004		

Silly chicken	Khan	2005	In Pakistan	
Shi-shi-etko	LaFave	2005	FN residential schools	
When you were small	O'Leary	2006		
Secret of the dance	Spalding	2006	FN	
I am Raven	D. Bouchard	2007	FN	
Blue Hippo	Fitzgerald	2007	In Egypt	
The list	H. Hutchins	2007		
Bella and bunny	Larsen	2007	skin colour of classmates	
The Aunts come marching	Richardso n	2007	different Aunts with instruments	
Mechanimals	Tougas	2007	"waking people in China"	
Aboriginal carol	Bouchard	2008	FN also written in Wendai	
Jenneli's Dance	Denny	2008	FN and difference w/ others	J B/C involved FN as minority group
Up Home	Grant	2008	Black family in Nova Scotia - historical reflection	
Mattland	H. Hutchins	2008	set of hands	
The west is calling	Harvey	2008	FN	
Littlest sled dog	Kusugak	2008	FN	
Wendel & the great one	Leonetti	2008	skin colour of teammates	
Missuk's snow geese	Renaud	2008	Up North (not labelled FN)	
A pocket can have a treasure in it	K. Stinson	2008		
Proud as a Peacock, brave as a lion	Barclay	2009		
Big and small room for all	Bogart	2009	Asian child - no interaction between characters	
Stella very small	Gay	2009	All "Stella" books have an image of a piece of paper with Asian writing - but no mention of minority groups	

Together	H. Hutchins	2009	Various families	
Farley follows	L.	2009	painter	
his nose King's Taster	Johnson K. Oppel	2009	Cook is Black / king is a child	J B/C want to analyze the relationship between (latent content) of the white child king and the Black chef
Bear hug	Oldland	2009		
Dragons I know	Ryan	2009		
Perfect snow	Reid	2009	Students	
Timmerman was here	Sydor	2009		
Our corner grocery store	Schwartz	2009	Italian store owners/ customers/ friends	
Harry & Horsie	Van camp	2009		
Silas' 7 grandparents	Horrocks	2010	various grandparents	J B/C about diversity in the family - grandparents / step grandparents
Mattoo lets play	Luxbacher	2010		
One of us	Moss	2010	main character new at school	
Good Garden	Milway	2010	In Honduras	J B/C set in a country outside of Canada - how does this change the portrayal of the characters
Canoe he called Loo Taas	Reid- Sterens	2010	FN	
OMIT B/C NEWER THAN 2010				
Sock wars	Christense n	2011	family darker skinned	
Ella May and the wishing stone	Fagan	2011	Friends	
Louis Tiger from the sea	Kozlowski	2011		
I want to go to the moon	Saunders	2011	friends at b-day party & army men	
Cookiebot	Van camp	2011		
Chubby, cuddly, hungry baby	Allard	2012	Diff skin colour for people	
Wishes	Little	2012	skin colours of friends	

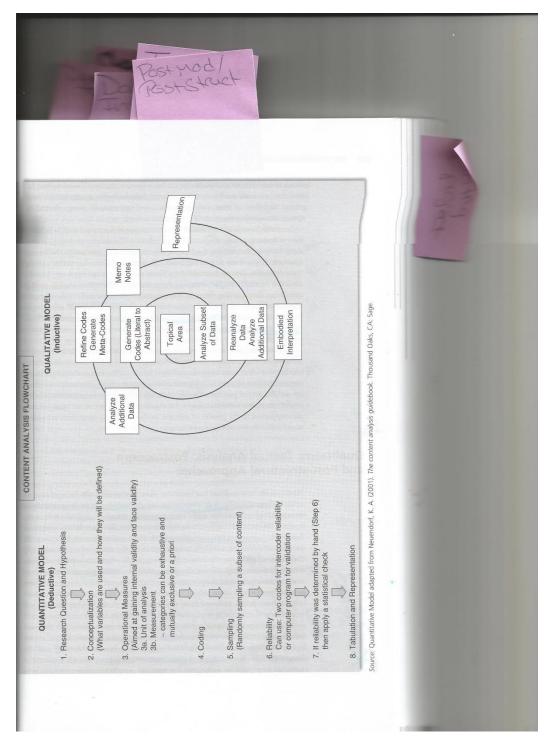
Lilly Loves	Luftner	2012	no skin colour	
It's my room	Munsch	2012		
The French Fry King	Roge	2012	Diff groups eating fries	
The Pancake express	Scott	2012		
Soccer crazy	Tibo	2012	teammates	
Good night world	# of FN authors	2012	FN	
Singingly skipping along	Fitch	2013	Various	
Read the Story Stella	Gay	2013		
Once upon a balloon	Galbraith	2013		
Whimsy's Heavy Things	Kraulis	2013	Asian best friend @ end of book	
Swamp Water	Munsch	2013		

# Appendix C

### Sample Chart

Selected Sample		Canadia	Canadian children's picture books (1980-2010) Representative of ethnic minorities - how has representation changed over 30yrs			
Title	Author	Year Pub	*Ref to minority group/ description	© use in sample & why		
1980's						
David's Father	Munsch	1983	Main character	B/C main character is dark skinned interacting with new kid "David" (white) and his strange family		
Paper Bag Princess EXCLUDED	Munsch	1980	EXCLUDED	© B/C earliest written work - lack of available 1980's Canadian authored books		
Jillian Jiggs	Gilman	1985	Rachel - Jillian's friends	© B/C one of few Canadian authors available besides Munsch & Jillian's friend is dark skinned		
A promise is a promise	Munsch	1988	Main character Inuit in NWT	© B/C main character Inuit - early portray of FN culture - compare to later works		
1990's						
Grandma and the pirates	Gilman	1990	Conquest of world by pirates - not converstaion w/ ethni	© B/C brief visual description - power based		
From Far Away	Munsch	1995	Main character an immigrant	© B/C interesting to see how an immigrant is represented - struggles discussed - From war-tom Beirut - does it say this i		
Baby dreams	Fernandes	1999	Different families	© B/C depiction of different families		
Flags	Trottier	1999	Asian neighbour japanese removed from home	B/Cit is situated in an ear of discrimination - is this represented in the story - how is the minority group protrayed?		
2000-2010						
Two shoes, blue shoes, new shoes	Fitz-Gibbon	2002	Black girl main character	© B/C Black girl is main character (compared to representations in Munsch's 1980' book)		
Silas' 7 grandparents	Horrocks	2010	various grandparents	© B/Cabout diversity in the family - grandparents / step grandparents		
King's Taster	K. Oppel	2009	Cook is Black / king is a child	B/C want to analyze the relationship between (latent content) of the white child king and the Black chef		
Good Garden	Milway	2010	In Honduras	© B/C set in a country outside of Canada - how does this change the portrayal of the characters		

Appendix D
Spiral and Linear Models of Research Design



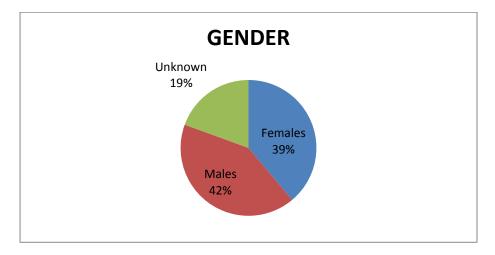
Source: Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2011). The practice of qualitative research (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

# Appendix E

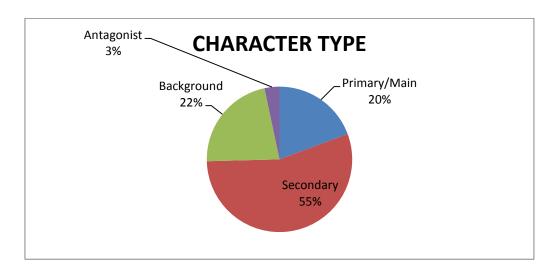
## Code Key

CODING KEY	
AGE	
GENDER	
	MALE
	FEMALE
	UNKNOWN / BOTH (group desc.)
ETHNICITY	
	UNKNOWN/IMPLICIT
	EXPLICIT
<b>CHARACTER TYPE</b>	
	PRIMARY/MAIN
	SECONDARY
	BACKGROUND
	ANTAGONIST/BAD GUYS
LOCATION	
LANGUAGE	

Appendix F
Visual Interpretations of Data

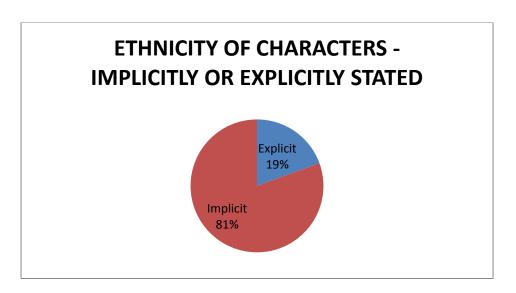


Gender	Total Characters
Females	14
Males	15
Unknown	7

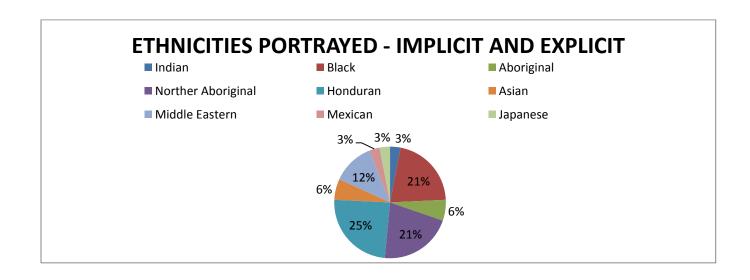


Character Type	Total Characters
Primary/Main	7

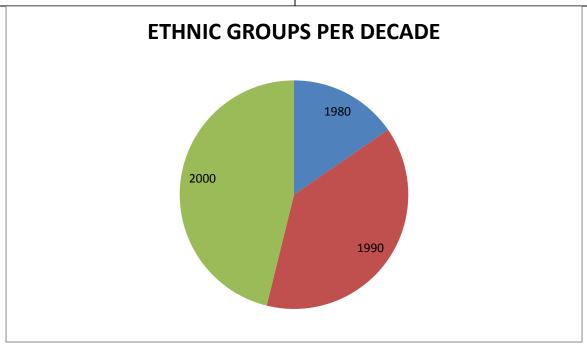
Secondary	20
Background	8
Antagonist	1



Ethnicity of Characters	Total Characters
Explicitly Stated	7
Implicitly Stated	29



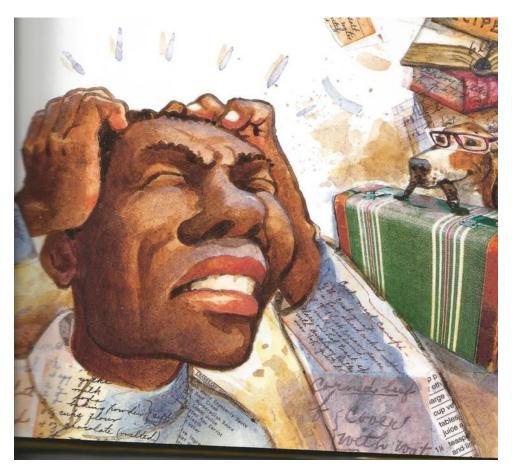
Ethnicity Portrayed	Total Characters
Indian	1
Black	7
Aboriginal	2
Northern Aboriginal	7
Honduran	8
Asian	2
Mexican	1
Japanese	1



Decade	Total Number of Ethnic Groups
1980s	2
1990s	5
2000s	6

Appendix G

Illustration from *The King's Taster* (2009) – Example of Characters' Over Emphasized Physical Features



Appendix H

Illustration from *A Promise is a Promise* (1988) – Example of Similar Physical Features for Ethnic Minority Characters



Appendix I

Illustration from Silas' Seven Grandparents (2010) - Illustration of Granny & Grandad –



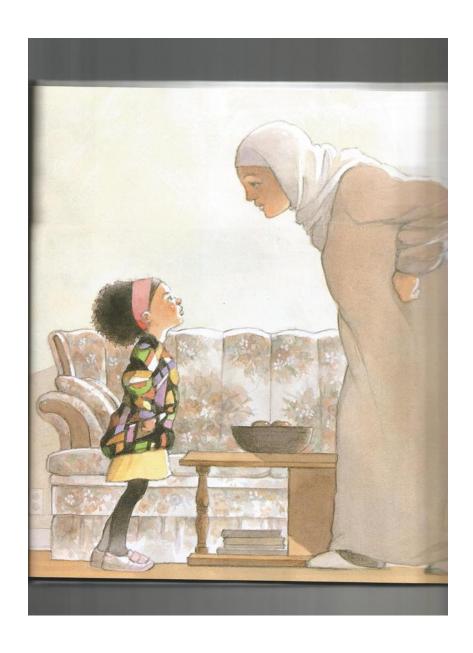
Appendix J

Illustration from *A Promise is a Promise* (1988) - Location Implied by Polar Bear Symbol on Father's Hat



Appendix K

Illustration from From Far Away (1995) - Experience of Culture Conflict – Saoussan & Mother



Appendix L

Illustration from *Silas' Seven Grandparents* (2010) - Stereotypes and Biases Emerge – Granny Removing a Bottle from Her Purse

