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Cultural Representation in Grade 1 Reading Books in Schools in the Western Cape of South Africa

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how African narratives and identities are represented in Grade 1 reading books from two Cape Winelands schools, evaluating the impact of post-Apartheid educational reforms on inclusivity and cultural relevance. Through qualitative content analysis, Afrikaans and isiXhosa materials are compared, focusing on themes, characters, settings, and hidden messages. Findings indicate Afrikaan's books prioritize Eurocentric narratives with dominant white characters and Western settings, marginalizing South African cultural realities. IsiXhosa books include more culturally relevant content but retain traces of Western epistemology. The study highlights how hidden curricula reinforce social inequalities by privileging Western worldviews, undermining African learners' cultural identity and self-awareness. It advocates for Afrocentric children's literature integrating indigenous knowledge, fostering cultural appreciation and educational equity. Curriculum developers, teacher education programs, and schools should adopt inclusive, contextually relevant materials that reflect learners' lived experiences and support identity formation.

Keywords: Afrocentrism, Children's literature, Cultural identity, Eurocentrism, Representation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of Apartheid, South Africa has undergone significant educational reforms to address historical inequities, with efforts to incorporate indigenous knowledge and African perspectives into curricula and textbooks. However, despite these changes, Eurocentric narratives continue to dominate Grade 1 children's literature, raising concerns about whether these reforms have been sufficient. According to Abdi (2006, p. 20), the European worldview established its dominance in Africa through colonial education and Western epistemic control (Ndlovu, 2014, p. 86). Buntu (2013, p. 7) argues that Western education transmits values that conflict with African worldviews. Heleta (2018, p. 51) asserts that Eurocentric ideologies are designed to instill a sense of inferiority toward African knowledge systems. This transmission of Western dominance occurs through textbooks, curricula, and educational resources, often neglecting African epistemology, which Buntu (2013, p. 7) suggests should include culturally significant literature such as fables, myths, and proverbs. The persistence of Eurocentric hegemony has marginalized African ways of knowing, even in post-colonial South Africa (Abdi, 2008, p. 309). Ndlovu (2014, p. 85) emphasizes the need to reclaim indigenous knowledge to address African challenges and promote a distinctive African identity. Understanding the relationship between culture, education, and development on the African continent is crucial (Abdi, 2006, p. 28).

Although there is no single definition of social justice, Hlalele (2012, p. 111) describes it as a humanizing process to dismantle exclusionary practices. Woods (2018:2) emphasizes social justice as promoting equity and acknowledging diversity within a human rights framework. In South Africa, colonialism and apartheid have entrenched systemic injustices, marginalizing specific groups (Patel, 2009, p. 66). Social justice focuses on equity rather than equality, ensuring individuals receive the resources they need to participate fully in society (Woods, 2018, p. 2). In the educational context, Flessner and Payne (2017, p. 2) assert that teaching should embed social justice principles within the curriculum, classrooms, and schools. However, South Africa grapples with social inequalities that obstruct educational progress. Hölscher (2014, p. 23) identifies socioeconomic disparities, power dynamics, and social positions as barriers that perpetuate the exclusion and privilege of certain groups. Addressing these systemic inequalities requires critical attention to the Western curriculum content imposed in South African schools (Flessner & Payne, 2017, p. 4). Promoting Social Justice theory aims to eradicate oppression and recalibrate privileges to achieve fairness (Hlalele, 2012, p. 113; Woods, 2018, p. 2). Frey and Blinne (2017, p. 4) suggest that these unjust structures can be challenged through open communication. This research integrates consultative, participative, and empowering methods (Hlalele, 2012, p. 113) to explore and address the educational phenomena under investigation.

This study investigates the representation of African narratives and identities in reading books from two schools in the Cape Winelands—an Afrikaans-medium school and an isiXhosa-medium school. Through qualitative content analysis, the research focuses on these texts' themes, characters, settings, and underlying messages to determine whether they reflect African social constructs and indigenous knowledge systems or perpetuate Western epistemologies that limit cultural identity and self-awareness.

The South African schooling curriculum has undergone multiple reforms since the democratic transition, starting with the shift from the Christian National Education curriculum to

Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in 1997, followed by the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002, and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in 2007. These reforms culminated in introducing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012 (Govender & Hugo, 2018). CAPS is a comprehensive Grade R–12 policy outlining subject-specific guidelines, time allocations, and assessment requirements (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2011). According to the South African schooling curriculum, beginner readers vary in age from 5 to 9 years, placing them in the Foundation Phase (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The Foundation Phase primarily includes Grade R, also known as the reception year, and includes Grades 1, 2, and 3 (Joubert, Bester, Meier & Evans, 2014, p. 309). For the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3), teachers are expected to teach four subjects: Mathematics, Life Skills, Home Language, and First Additional Language. The Home Language subject, a focal point of this study, is divided into four components: Listening and Speaking, Reading and Phonics, Handwriting, and Writing. The CAPS policy mandates 4 hours and 30 minutes of instruction per week for Reading and Phonics, which includes Shared Reading, Group Guided Reading, Paired and Independent Reading, and daily phonics activities (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 9-11). Despite the detailed instructional framework, the CAPS document offers minimal guidance on the specific genres or representations that should be included in Grade 1 literature. Although the policy implies the use of stories like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* to facilitate reading comprehension, it leaves significant ambiguity about the types of literature that should be prioritized, especially about culturally relevant and Afrocentric content (South Africa. Department of Basic Education 2011, p. 75). CAPS emphasizes promoting human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems. The curriculum is intended to be sensitive to diversity factors such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, and disability, aligning with the principles enshrined in the South African Constitution (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 5).

However, Venketsamy and Sibanda (2021) highlight that the lack of culturally relevant literature risks delaying the development of learners' identity, while Buntu (2013) warns that the absence of African social constructs in children's literature could undermine self-awareness and consciousness in the learners who read these. Additionally, the translation of literature from Eurocentric contexts can introduce linguistic and cultural biases, resulting in a reduction of learners' engagement and social awareness. The practical implementation of CAPS policies is further complicated by resource-related challenges, significantly affecting teachers' ability to deliver the curriculum effectively (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Makeleni & Sethusha, 2014). These challenges impede curriculum delivery and influence how teachers interpret and implement the CAPS guidelines, particularly concerning the selection and teaching of prescriptive literature in Grade 1.

Using children's literature to promote literacy, cognitive development, and cultural awareness teaches values and reinforces societal norms. As Adam et al. (2019) highlight, children's literature reflects their cultural understandings, beliefs, and life experiences, shaping how they engage with their world. However, Western middle-class values dominate many school settings, dictating what is validated and shared (Evans et al., 2018). These values perpetuate colonial ideologies, which reinforce societal hierarchies. Lebeloane (2017) argues that this is a hidden curriculum that serves as an indoctrination mechanism for the dominant culture, embedding colonial values in the minds of learners. Thus, teachers must critically engage with children's literature to avoid perpetuating harmful narratives. Children's literature also plays a central role in developing

critical thinking and citizenship skills, exposing children to social justice issues such as poverty and discrimination (Bradbery, 2012). Despite this, scholars note that much of children's literature lacks cultural diversity, a concern that must be addressed if schools are to function as spaces for social justice. By aligning reading materials with children's cultural realities, educators can foster an inclusive environment that supports identity development and empathy. For literature to be truly transformative, it must reflect culturally relevant themes and challenge children to engage with pressing social issues such as racism and intolerance (Bradbery, 2012). Illustrations, a crucial aspect of children's literature, provide visual cues that aid comprehension and emotional engagement. Through their portrayal of realistic settings and cultural markers, practical illustrations help children connect with their cultural heritage (Adam et al., 2019). However, there is often a lack of cultural diversity in many children's books, and this remains a continuing issue, reinforcing the dominance of Western epistemologies and marginalizing African perspectives. Therefore, the prescribed literature must reflect South African learners' cultural realities, fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment (Short, 2018; Lebeloane, 2017).

Concerning pedagogy, Adam *et al*. (2019, p. 554) signify the interaction between pedagogical practices, children's literature, and children's learning - and how learning depends on the teacher's knowledge, skills, and judgment. Cremin, Mottram, Bearne, and Goodwin (2008:2), therefore, assert that there is a vital connection between those above and the teacher's professional knowledge, how they use children's literature in the classroom context, and ultimately, the text that they use to develop young readers. To address the existing state of affairs, this paper argues that emphasis must be placed on the teachers' knowledge of children's literature and the pedagogical use of children's literature in the classroom (Cremin *et al*., 2008, p. 1). Furthermore, if the content of the literature used to teach literacy does not reflect the culture or life experiences of the learners, it could also be problematic. To make matters worse, Evans, Joubert, and Meier (2018, p. 26) state that there is a serious misconception based on flawed assumptions that knowledge is created by assembling and memorizing facts and that children learn nothing from children's literature. Eradicating such misconceptions and flawed assumptions within the educational setting is critical, as this can significantly harm human development and hinder progression in teaching literature. For an extensive period, Grade 1 teachers' creative and innovative use of children's literature has been restricted by a centralized system, particularly concerning the selection of prescribed books for literature (Al Darwish, 2014, p. 78). Fundamentally, this brings prescriptive children's literature, how it is taught, its utilization, the content, and the challenges that may occur under scrutiny. Given the Grade 1 teacher's significant role as the mediator in using children's literature within the classroom context, teachers must continuously and consistently reflect on the practical implications of their pedagogical methods. In light of those above, it then becomes pivotal to investigate the type and content of prescriptive children's literature that teachers use. It was crucial to look at the state of things in two schools in the Western Cape of South Africa to determine what depictions and content, specifically related to African characters, were found in prescriptive literature in Grade 1.

2. METHOD

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative content analysis design. They were used as the data collection method where a subjective interpretation of the text (unit of analysis) was done through a systematic coding process and identifying patterns or themes (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014, p. 258;

Shava, Hleza, Tlou, Shonhiwa & Mathonsi, 2021, p. 554). The emphasis of this qualitative content analysis was on the textual content and the visual narratives depicted in the Grade 1 reading books selected for literacy development. To ensure that the system of analysis was met with the measures of trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in a thick description of the codes and units of analysis and peer review, where all images and text were cross-checked to ensure that the same interpretation had been reached. A rigorous audit trail of the analysis was also kept (Elo, Kaariainen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen & Kyngas, 2014; Vicent, 2015). According to Akyıldız & Ahmed (2021, p. 10), qualitative content analysis is a significant research technique utilized to assess patterns, words, and perceptions in the data obtained. The process that was followed is depicted in Figure 1 below:

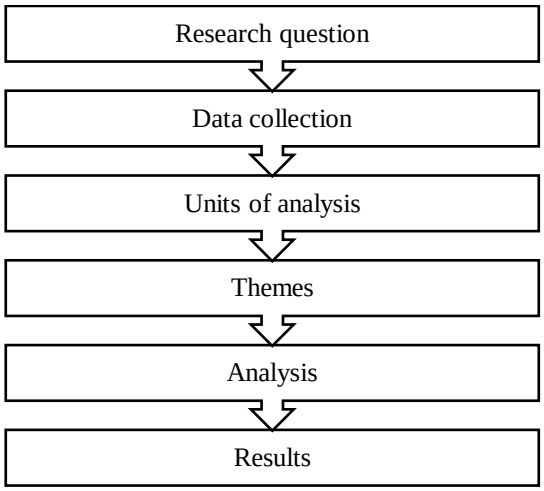

Figure 1: Content analysis process

As depicted in the process figure above, this study was guided by the research question: "What are the depictions and content of African characters in prescriptive literature in Grade 1?" and the coding of the selected books was conducted using the following units of analysis: (1) Number of white characters in the book, (2) Number of black or darker characters in the book, (3) Number of times South African representation occurred in the book and (4) Number of Eurocentric elements in the book. This was done because Western epistemologies and Eurocentric indoctrination still enjoy carte blanche in the South African schooling system. In contrast, viable Indigenous epistemologies, which can address inequalities and have the potential to address the literacy crisis in South Africa, are ignored (Mahabeer, 2020, p. 5). Since Social Justice underpins this study, it was critical to investigate the content of prescriptive literature to redistribute and deconstruct distorted information so that there is a balance of information to benefit learners (Lebeloane, 2017, p. 5).

Site

The research study occurred in two schools in the Western Cape Province in South Africa. These schools were purposively identified because they are low-resourced schools, which is a more accurate reflection of the state of most public schools in South Africa (Haffejee, Simelani & Mwanda, 2024, p. 7). The first school (school A) is where Afrikaans is the language spoken and taught, while the second school is an isiXhosa school (school B), where this is the language of instruction and engagement. The reason for selecting two schools to be part of this study is also related to the fact

that we wanted to determine if there were differences between the books offered in the different languages.

Data collection instruments

Nine Afrikaans books from different levels in the Grade 1 reading series were randomly extracted at school A, and by counting in threes, a book from every third pile was chosen. Eight isiXhosa prescriptive books were extracted at school B using the same procedure. Because none of the books were written in English, it was decided first to draw up a table in which the titles of the books selected for this study were translated into English. This can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Translated titles of all the prescriptive reading books in this study

	Title	Translation into English
Afrikaans books		
Book 1	Gaan weg, Flappie!	Go away, Flappie!
Book 2	Die dolfyne	The dolphins
Book 3	Kalla se skoene	Kalla's shoes
Book 4	'n Nuwe hond	The new dog
Book 5	Niemand wil speel nie	Nobody wants to play
Book 6	Op die strand	On the beach
Book 7	Rooi en blou	Red and blue
Book 8	Vlooi se partytjie	Vlooi's party
Book 9	Wegkrui-pertjie	Hide and go seek
isiXhosa books		
Book 10	Incwadi Enkulu yamaba-lana 3	The Big Book of Lana 3
Book 11	Incwadi Enkulu yamaba-lana 4	The Big Book of Lana 4
Book 12	Incwadi eNkulu	The Big Book
Book 13	Isikhukukazi esibom-vu	The grey hen
Book 14	Uliso nabahlobo bakhe	Aliso and his friends
Book 15	Uthando Lwabazali	The love of parents
Book 16	Silinga-nisa iimpa-hle	We are trying to measure up
Book 17	ukutya kwamaxesha amaninzi	Food of many colors

Once the book titles were translated into English, the same convention for analysis was followed with both sets of books. The data was documented in record notes and in table form. The units of analysis were expressly noted, and images from the books were photographed as examples. This was done in line with the content analysis methodology proposed by Krippendorff (2012). We then continued to identify and define the codes to be applied by tabulating the raw data under the following units of analysis: 1) Number of white characters in the book. 2) Number of black or darker characters in the book. 3) Number of times South African representation occurred in the book. 4) Number of Eurocentric elements in the book. The data was then recorded on a record note template, as in Table 2.

Table 2: Example of record note template

	Unit of analysis	Example
Book		

Data analysis

According to Krippendorff (2012), recording occurs when analysts interpret and express their findings formally in analysis. Coding, in content analysis, refers to this process following standardized, observer-independent rules; in this study, these rules were governed by the unit of analysis. This coding process was repeated three times for each book. Onwuegbuzie, Frels, and Hwang (2016, p. 146) suggest that the Saldaña Coding method is a suitable method of data analysis for researchers, particularly those who will engage in social research. The model for data analysis of this research study was Saldaña's Coding method (Saldana, 2013). The cyclical coding and analysis process identified key themes as common reference points. According to Vaismoradi, Turunen, Jones, and Snelgrove (2016), themes are attributes or concepts that organize recurring ideas. The analysis identified meanings, patterns, themes, and hidden messages within the text and illustrations. The objective was twofold: to assess the frequency of white characters compared to black or darker characters and to evaluate the presence of Eurocentric elements alongside instances of South African representation. The qualitative analysis examined how often these themes appeared, highlighting the prominence of specific character portrayals and cultural elements within the books from both schools. Following this convention allowed us to condense raw data into themes based on valid interpretations and inferences. According to Shava et al. (2021, p. 554), this process uses inductive reasoning. Thus, themes emerged from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001). Insertions of depictions from the Grade 1 prescribed books were used for juxtaposition since the analysis of visual material was organized and presented through the double lenses of aesthetics (Sørensen, 2015, p. 49).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the study's findings on the content analysis of 17 reading books in Grade 1 in the Foundation Phase at two language schools. When comparing the two tables, it is evident that there is a juxtaposition between the prescriptive literary content in School A, an Afrikaans school, and School B, an isiXhosa school. Metcalfe (2015, p. 152) defines this visual juxtaposition as a qualitative inquiry through contrast, and I will compare the two tables using this visual juxtaposition. This inquiry created an opportunity to qualitatively analyze the tables through side-by-side comparison and highlighting the contrast between the two tables. Additionally, other factors considered for this juxtaposition were the illustrators and authors, the setting of the story, and the hidden message. By employing juxtaposition for this discussion, the objective is to provide an opportunity for an expanded understanding of the difference in the content of prescriptive literature in Grade 1 in the two respective schools.

The content analysis tables are presented first, with a brief discussion of the findings and an in-depth discussion of the themes derived from the analysis. The significant themes related to 1) Characterization, (2) Representation, and (3) the hidden curriculum.

Table 3: Analysis of Afrikaans books at school A

	Book 1	**Book 2**	**Book 3**	**Book 4**	**Book 5**	**Book 6**	**Book 7**	**Book 8**	**Book 9**

White characters	5	1	12	6	11	24	20	5	4
Darker/ Black characters	2	2	2	0	2	0	4	0	1
South African representation	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Eurocentric elements	1	1	0	0	3	1	1	1	1

The findings from the table highlight a significant imbalance in representation across nine books. White characters dominate most narratives, ranging from 1 to 24 per book, whereas darker or Black characters appear far less frequently, with some books containing no such representation. South African representation is almost nonexistent, appearing only once across all nine books. Several books present Eurocentric elements, reinforcing a Western-centric perspective and further emphasizing a lack of diversity and inclusivity in the narratives. This suggests a need for more culturally diverse and locally relevant literature, particularly in contexts seeking to promote representation and inclusivity.

The prescriptive books for Grade 1 were authored by Roderick Hunt, a British children's author, who wrote an *Oxford Reading Tree* series, which was then translated to *Oxford Storieboom* for South African Grade 1 Afrikaans classes. British illustrator Alex Brychta collaborated with Roderick Hunt for the *Oxford Reading Tree* series. Children's literature authored by Hunt, with most illustrations by Alex Brychta, is used to teach reading in 80% of British primary schools and more than 120 countries worldwide. We randomly extracted books from Phases 1, 2, and 3 for beginner to advanced readers for this qualitative analysis.

Table 4: Analysis of isiXhosa books at School B

	Book 10	**Book 11**	**Book 12**	**Book 13**	**Book 14**	**Book 15**	**Book 16**	**Book 17**
White characters	13	0	0	0	0	11	2	0
Darker/ Black characters	16	0	11	0	64	4	6	5
South African representation	2	0	3	0	1	2	1	2
Eurocentric elements	2	2	0	1	0	1	0	0

The data from the table reveals a shift towards more excellent representation of darker or Black characters in several books, with notable figures such as 11, 16, and 64 darker characters in some cases, while others still lack any diversity. White characters remain prominent in a few books but absent in others. South African representation, though minimal, appears sporadically, suggesting some efforts toward local inclusion. Eurocentric elements persist in a few books, indicating that while

some narratives embrace diversity, others reflect Western-centric perspectives. Overall, the findings point to a mixed landscape, with varying cultural and racial representation across the books.

Half the isiXhosa prescriptive books were published by the Department of Basic Education and did not state the authors. Three of these books contained multiple stories. The authors of the remaining prescriptive books were established South African children's literature authors, namely, Tracy Blues, Gcina Mhlophe, Sindiwe Magona, Colleen Nonkululelo Gqamlana, and Ntombokuqala Bokoloshe. Natalie Hinrichsen and Alzette Prins were the South African illustrators for their respective stories.

As a point of departure, the authors and illustrators of the books played a critical role in the content, depictions, and setting of the books. Inversely, South Africans wrote and illustrated the prescriptive literature for School B. Therefore, the context, content, setting, plot, and depictions are relevant and relatable to a South African frame of reference. This is important because indigenous knowledge systems must be rescued from Eurocentric views. Therefore, according to Ndlovu (2014, p. 85), the authors and illustrators are addressing the challenge of creating 'unique African humanness' in children's literature.

Characters

The analysis of Table 3 indicates that white or lighter-skinned characters dominate the narratives in the nine books designed for Afrikaans learners. The primary characters are all portrayed as white, positioning them as the protagonists throughout the series. This lack of diversity is problematic, as darker-skinned or Black characters are relegated to secondary roles. In one example, Book 6, all the beachgoers are depicted as white, an unrealistic representation given the diversity of South African society. Among the nine books, only one features more Black characters than white ones, while three books entirely exclude Black characters. Figure 1, featured below, is an example of one of the white-dominated scenes.

Figure 2

The data from Table 4 further reveals that darker or Black characters are more prominent in the prescriptive books used by School B. However, two of these prescriptive texts, which do not

include Black characters, are animal stories that focus on moral lessons. Additionally, five of the eight prescriptive books contain no white characters, two being animal-centered moral tales. In Book 15, the story begins with photographic depictions of the characters, which later shift to animated figures, creating visual inconsistencies that complicate narrative coherence. This disparity in character representation across the series highlights significant challenges in reflecting South African society's cultural and racial diversity within these texts.

Setting

This theme explores the alignment, or lack thereof, between the settings depicted in children's literature and the cultural and societal contexts familiar to young readers. It examines how, in School A, specific stories in the selected books portray environments that are disconnected from South African realities, using idealized imagery and settings irrelevant to local experiences. In contrast, the prescriptive books from School B offer culturally appropriate settings that resonate with the daily lives of South African children, thereby enhancing relatability and engagement with the narratives.

The setting of a story refers to the time and place in which it unfolds. In the nine stories analyzed at School A, all are set during the daytime; however, most still need to depict the cultural and societal context of South Africa. Idealized images of wooden houses with picket fences frequently appear in the illustrations despite these being uncommon in South African landscapes. For instance, Book 2 is set in a dolphinarium, a location incongruous with the reality that dolphins in South Africa are typically oceanic. This setting, therefore, presents an unrealistic and misguided portrayal of aquatic life, which needs to be revised for a South African child's experience. Overall, the settings in the reading series need to accurately reflect a South African environment that Grade 1 learners can quickly identify with. Figure 3 below highlights Eurocentric houses and gardens, while Figure 4 shows a dolphinarium.

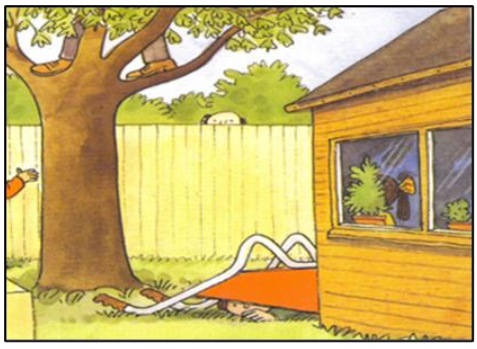

Figure 3

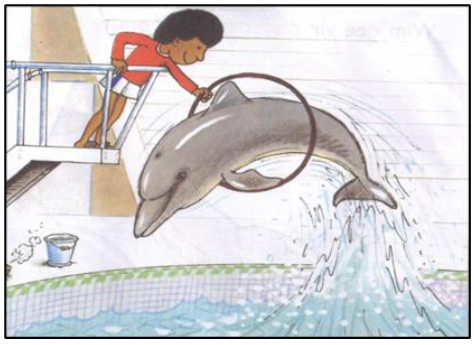

Figure 4

In contrast, the prescriptive books from School B present settings far more relatable to the South African context. Most of these stories take place on farms featuring farm animals and laborers, with familiar elements such as pumpkins on roofs, cornfields, and yellow minibus taxis used for school transportation. These settings offer a more culturally and contextually relevant depiction for young South African readers, as seen in Figure 5. It must be noted, though, that the depiction of rural

contexts could only represent a stereotypical view of settings in South Africa. What needs to be added to the books in our analysis are authentic representations of urban South Africa, likely to be the daily lived reality of learners in this country.

Figure 5

The setting of the stories in books at School A does not portray South Africa or Africa at large. Eurocentric or British elements characterize the depictions in the books because both the author and illustrator of these books are British. Even though the series was translated to Afrikaans and the names of characters were changed to Afrikaans names, Livingston (2018:9) suggests that changing the names of characters does not change a Eurocentric story into an African one. A critical review by Madolo (2017) reveals this is problematic because translating children's literature from languages with Eurocentric social constructs generates linguistic disadvantages, cultural biases, and a lack of social awareness (Madolo, 2017, p. 358).

South African Representation

The data presented in Table 3 reveals a minimal representation of South African cultural elements within the analyzed texts. Among the nine books, only Book 6 contains a potential South African element: a donkey offering recreational rides. The donkey, ‘Long Ear,' is the only hint of a localized feature. Yet, no further contextual markers identify the setting as South African or suggest that donkey rides are a culturally significant activity in the region.

In contrast, the qualitative analysis of the prescriptive books from School B school demonstrates a more consistent portrayal of South African representation, except for two animal stories. These animal stories, adapted from English fairy tales with moral lessons, originate outside Africa and were translated into isiXhosa, further reflecting the influence of non-African narratives. In School B, we found examples of authentic South African representations in the prescriptive books, which included depictions of a grandmother in traditional attire holding a cup featuring the South African flag, a girl wearing a traditional dress with what appears to be an isiXhosa beaded necklace, and a woman in traditional clothing boarding a bus. Additional portrayals include a South African woman wearing a dark (headscarf) and two children eating maize meal (pap), highlighting culturally relevant elements that resonate with South African social life. As with the depictions of the setting in the isiXhosa books, it must be noted that urban realities are not reflected. It is essential to

acknowledge this fact as the urban realities of South Africa are less 'romantic 'than the rural or traditional settings. These traditional elements are depicted in the figures below:

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

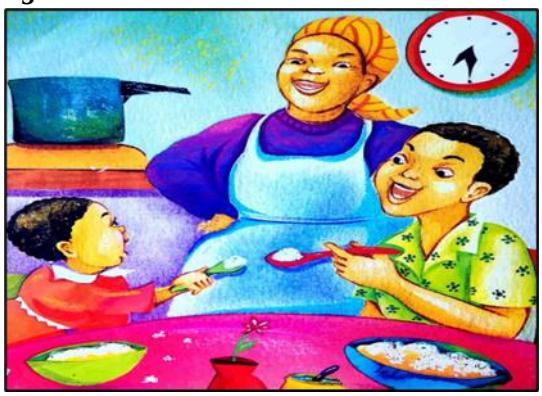

Figure 9

4.4 Eurocentric Elements

Our analysis reveals a significant presence of Eurocentric elements within the books from School A, reflecting cultural references disconnected mainly from South African contexts. A recurring motif is the depiction of wooden houses with picket fences—an architectural style rooted in British culture and uncommon in South African landscapes. Another distinctly British symbol, the freestanding red pillar mailbox, appears to represent British heritage, and the inclusion of the King's Guard, a British icon, is depicted five times in Book 8. The influence of Western popular culture is also evident, as shown by the appearance of cowboys and the American Marvel superhero *Spiderman* in Book 5. These visual and narrative elements highlight the pervasive presence of Western epistemologies throughout the books, as demonstrated by Table 3, which indicates that half of the prescriptive books contain Eurocentric concepts. These references are irrelevant primarily to South African children's developmental needs and cultural frames of reference.

Figure 10

Figure 11

In Book 15, for example, the father encourages his children to eat a traditional English breakfast—consisting of eggs, milk, cheese, strawberries, bread, and butter—even though a typical isiXhosa breakfast would consist of maize porridge.

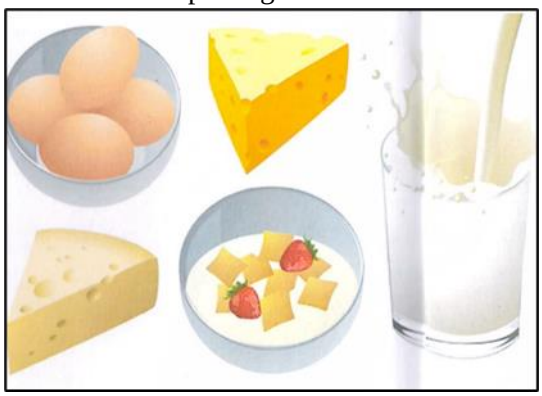

Figure 12

Similarly, the well-known English fairy tale *The Three Little Pigs* was merely translated into isiXhosa, even though wolves, a key narrative element, are not native to South Africa, raising questions about the story's relevance to our learners. It must be noted that the archetypes used in fairytales are universal; many African stories based on animals and creation myths could have been used rather than relying on the translation of a Eurocentric fairytale.

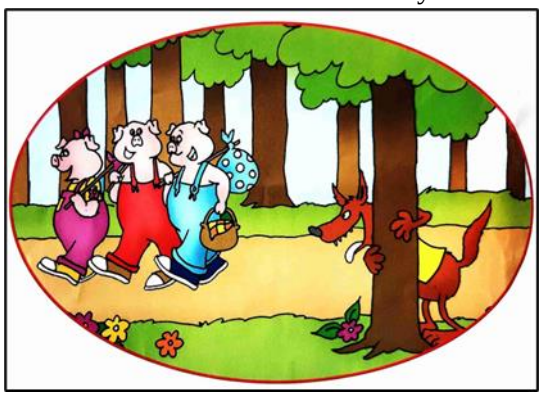

Figure 13

Furthermore, Book 10 includes American superheroes, such as *Spiderman* and *Superman*, as examples of dress-up characters in the story. These examples underscore the prevalence of Western cultural elements, which detract from developing culturally relevant learning experiences for South

African learners. What is particularly concerning is that South Africa has its superhero, *Kwezi* (Mkize, 2021), which has been in the public sphere since 2014.

Figure 14

Figure 15

Hidden Messages

In Book 5, Wim, the protagonist, is the only Black male main character across all nine analyzed books. However, the title and narrative can be interpreted as portraying a sense of despair and exclusion. Wim's character is introduced with the phrase 'Wim is angry' on the first page, positioning him as frustrated and isolated. This portrayal aligns with Smith's (2011, p. 190) concept of 'hidden dehumanization,' where darker-skinned characters in children's literature are associated with negative emotions such as fear, anger, or violence.

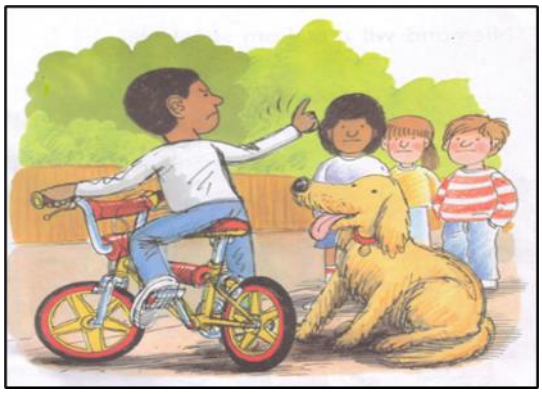

Figure 16

The plot of Book 7, which centers on a football match, also contains underlying messages tied to South Africa's history of racial segregation. In the story, all the players on the red team are depicted as white, subtly reflecting the legacy of apartheid-era restrictions that prohibited racially mixed teams in competitive sports. Although these messages are not overt, Evans et al. (2018, p. 13) warn of the impact of unconscious biases in children's literature, mainly when authored by individuals from dominant cultural groups. Such biases can perpetuate stereotypes, influencing children's understanding of social dynamics and cultural norms.

Children's literature is critical in constructing and conveying messages about societal values, cultural practices, and lived experiences (Adam et al., 2019, p. 551). While some aspects of the analyzed texts reinforce problematic biases, other depictions challenge conventional stereotypes. For example, Figure 17 subverts gender norms by portraying a female character as a truck driver, traditionally assigned to male characters in children's stories. This representation serves as a commendable counter-narrative to gender stereotypes and sexist ideologies, emphasizing the importance of exposing children to diverse and inclusive representations. Research by Monoyiou and Symeonidou (2016, p. 2) and Beckett, Ellison, Barrett, and Shah (2010, p. 373) emphasizes that children's literature significantly influences how young readers shape their perceptions of social life. Therefore, promoting non-stereotypical and inclusive narratives is essential for fostering more equitable thinking methods in future generations.

Figure 17

The analysis reveals that Eurocentric books used in Afrikaans schools predominantly feature white characters as protagonists, with darker or black characters relegated to secondary roles and typically introduced later in the narratives. In contrast, isiXhosa schools primarily use books that feature black or darker-skinned characters as protagonists, with white characters in the minority. This reflects a more accurate portrayal of South Africa's ethnic demographics, aligning with the country's population composition. Tables 1 and 2 highlight that elements of Eurocentrism are present in the prescriptive books of both schools, though Afrikaans schools feature more Eurocentric content. Notably, the Afrikaans books include only one potential South African cultural element— donkey rides —without confirming whether the setting is South African.

In contrast, the isiXhosa books present more South African and African themes, with most books showcasing local representation, except for two animal-themed books derived from English fairy tales. The analysis also identifies hidden messages within both sets of books. The secret message in the Afrikaans books, which are British in origin, presents a derogatory portrayal of a black male character, emphasizing traits such as anger, sadness, and pity alongside an all-white football team. In contrast, the hidden message in a South African-produced book challenges gender stereotypes. Portraying a female truck driver, indicating progress toward addressing gender inequality in children's literature. This juxtaposition highlights the persistence of racial stereotyping

in imported content while demonstrating positive strides toward gender representation in locally produced literature.

4. CONCLUSION

This article highlights the persistent influence of Western knowledge systems in South African classrooms, with a hegemonic Eurocentric canon in children's prescriptive literature impeding the development of African knowledge systems and cultural consciousness. The dominance of Eurocentric narratives is problematic as it elevates Western European philosophies, values, and culture as inherently superior, undermining African ways of knowing. To promote social justice in education, addressing these Eurocentric ideologies that instill a sense of inferiority toward African systems of knowledge is imperative. A culture of non-oppressiveness must be institutionalized to benefit the most vulnerable members of society, ensuring that marginalization and exclusionary practices in prescriptive literature are eradicated across all social strata. Despite significant efforts to redress past inequities in the post-Apartheid era, concerns remain about the extent to which African representation is reflected in the literature prescribed for Grade 1 learners. This study focuses on Grade 1 reading books in the Cape Winelands area, assessing whether their content has evolved over the last three decades to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and African social constructs. Scholars such as Venketsamy and Sibanda (2021) emphasize the importance of literacy resources that align with learners' contexts. Buntu (2013) warns that excluding African social constructs hinders the development of self-knowledge and consciousness. The findings reveal that Afrikaans books prioritize Western narratives and white protagonists, minimizing the representation of African identities, while isiXhosa books present more culturally relevant themes, though Western influences persist. The study highlights the hidden curriculum in children's literature, perpetuating inequality by reinforcing Western epistemologies and impeding children's ability to connect with their cultural heritage, ultimately promoting an incomplete sense of identity. To address these challenges, the study advocates for a paradigm shift towards Afrocentrism in children's literature, recommending that teacher training programs, curriculum developers, and schools adopt inclusive, culturally relevant reading materials to mitigate educational inequities. Although the study's limited scope, focusing on only two schools, raises questions about generalizability, it offers valuable insights into the linguistic, cultural, and epistemological biases in early literacy education in South Africa.

Based on the findings presented in this article, several practical recommendations are made for schools, the Western Cape Education Department, and teacher training institutions. First, schools should ensure access to literary resources beyond the prescriptive books selected by district officials and provided to teachers, thereby broadening the scope of materials available to learners. It is essential to equip Grade 1 teachers with the necessary support and resources to implement the curriculum and teach prescriptive literature effectively. Additionally, schools must remain critically aware of hidden curricula that transmit unintended messages reinforcing colonial discourses and dominant cultural values. To address the disproportionate representation of African and cultural diversity, the selection of prescriptive literature should be re-evaluated to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems. The principle of inclusivity and social transformation (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2011) should be applied to ensure no culture is portrayed as superior, emphasizing cultural relativity. A paradigm shift towards Afrocentrism is recommended, integrating contemporary Afrocentric content into prescriptive literature. Furthermore, teacher education programs should include coursework that builds a repertoire of children's literature, trains teachers

to analyze and select texts critically, and prepares them to challenge Eurocentric narratives in their classrooms. Finally, future teachers should be equipped with the skills to utilize modern information and communication technologies to teach literature effectively in a digitally evolving educational landscape.

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