Depictions and Gaps: Portrayal of U.S. Poverty in Realistic Fiction Children's Picture Books

Jane E. Kelley, Ed.D.
Washington State University, Pullman, WA

Janine J. Darragh, Ph.D.
Whitworth University, Spokane, WA

Abstract

Researchers conducted a critical multicultural analysis of 58 realistic fiction children's picture books that portray people living in poverty and compared these depictions to recent statistics from the United States Census Bureau. The picture books were examined for the following qualities: main character, geographic locale and time era, focal poor character (gender, age, and race), who demonstrated action, and the type of action (individual, community, systemic) demonstrated. Results of the analysis showed that while in some areas the books accurately reflect the reality in the United States today, there are other areas in which poverty is misrepresented. For example, while the attribute of gender was found to be accurately reflected in the literature, depictions of contemporary rural poverty as well as action performed at the systemic level are seemingly absent. The analysis concludes with implications for teaching as well as recommended books to consider for inclusion in a classroom library.

Introduction

In light of the recent economic crisis in the United States, poverty and homelessness are at the forefront of many people's minds as it is nearly impossible not to be personally affected or to know someone affected by monetary hardships. According to the 2009 poverty guidelines provided by the Federal Register of the United States Department of Health, poverty is defined as a single person with an income of less than $10,830; for a family of four, the poverty line is $22,050 (Federal

Register, 2009). Today, virtually one in five American children lives in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB], 2006-2008), and there are more homeless families with children than any other time since the Great Depression. Meanwhile, many company executives earn nearly 400 times what their factory workers earn (a statistic up from 42 times in 1980), resulting in the fact that the top one percent of the United States' population possesses one-third of the nation's wealth (American Human Development Project, 2009).

As with any struggle the issues of poverty and homelessness filter into the classroom, and teachers must find ways to address and educate their students about these delicate situations. Picture books can provide a forum for children to learn about and understand others, yet what messages do these books about poverty and homelessness depict? In this critical multicultural analysis, we examine realistic fiction children's picture books juxtaposed to recent statistical information about poverty. Since it is possible that teachers may need to help their students cope with family financial struggles, this study specifically highlights embedded messages in books about poverty. Additionally, recommendations are made for how to share books with children and how to incorporate them into a classroom library. The article ends with a bibliography of children's books depicting poverty.

Depictions of Poverty in Children's Literature

It is distressing to find that while the topic of poverty may be in the forefront of the minds of the media, government leaders, and the American people, we, like Chafel, Fitzgibbons, Cutter, and Burke-Weiner (1997), found a dearth of current research regarding depictions of poverty in children's books. Moreover, among the research found, the information was conflicting, with statistics and claims often contradicting each other.

Representations

Many years ago, Dixon (1977) found that working class children did not appear at all in picture books and that children were not be able to find themselves, nor the world in which they lived, in their reading. Chafel et al. (1997) and Fitzgibbons and Tilley (1999) found the number of portrayals of poor White families in children's literature to be a more accurate representation of American society, while at the same time identifying a limited number of books representing poor African Americans and no depictions of poor Asian Americans. Additionally, Chafel et al. (1997) determined that poor Hispanic people were underrepresented in literature as well, and Lamme (2000) claimed that picture books rarely portrayed

children living in poverty and when they do, they are often stereotypical in nature. More recently, Jones (2008) found that while there were several picture books depicting African American and Latino families that are poor, there was also an underrepresentation of White working class and poor families in children's literature. She continued by explaining that in 2006, Non-Hispanic Whites comprised more than half of all Americans living in poverty, and the underrepresentation of poor White families in children's literature may further perpetuate negative stereotypical views that race and class are intertwined. Clearly there is a lack of consensus among scholarly research regarding the representations of people living in poverty, though these discrepancies may be due in part to the time of the research and researchers having different selection criteria for the books analyzed.

Themes

Chafel et al., (1997) identified nine categories for coding and analyzing realistic fiction books about poverty published between 1968 and 1993: occupation, income, employment, unemployment, race, ethnicity, geographic locale, education, and family structure. They found that while some of the books digressed from demographic trends, most of them portrayed poverty accurately. Fitzgibbons and Tilley (1999) also identified two recurring themes, homelessness and violence, that emerged from the 20 books they analyzed. In addition, they analyzed the illustrations, noting the recurring images, such as health and nutrition, sanitation, and money. In looking beyond the representation of characters, Lamme (2000) identified themes and images of poverty in picture books with international settings. These themes included luck, resiliency, interdependence, and resourcefulness and could be found among the six recurring categories that emerged: fathers who leave home for work, child laborers, transportation, housing, children who lack material goods, and the barter system. These issues seemed to be evident in both books specifically about poverty and books in which the characters happen to be poor. Similarly, Kelley, Rosenberger, and Botelho (2005) identified seven recurring themes that emerged from an analysis of children's literature about poverty. In this study, each book analyzed contained at least three of the following themes: luck, invisibility, alienation, interdependence, resourcefulness, resiliency, and activism. Lastly, Jones (2008) identified two common phenomena emerging from children's picture books about class: representations and reinventions. She posited that a variety of contradictory depictions of people living in poverty and those in the working class sector can confuse young readers. In addition, Jones (2008) was concerned at the apparent lack of representation in children's literature of those of lower

socioeconomic classes, as this invisibility solidified the notion that middle and upper socioeconomic classes are the norm and therefore are more desirable.

Voices Heard, Voices Silenced

While of grave concern is the sheer lack of representation of poverty in children's picture books, equally disturbing are the portrayals that are evident in some of the books that *do* exist, as well as the stories that are not told. Dixon (1977) notes that children's literature "has the overall effect, whether conscious or not, either on the part of the writer or on that of the reader, of indoctrinating children with a capitalistic ideology" (p. 70). He goes on to identify recurring patterns that emerge in children's literature that serve to:

> Bolster up feudalism: the small and the powerless, plus cleverness, equals victory over the large and powerful; poor people, plus kindness, equals wealth; poor girls, plus beauty, equals marrying the prince; poor boys, plus success in trials or tasks, equals marrying the princess; law-abiding equals reward. (p. 71)

These often inaccurate and unrealistic portrayals may give children false perceptions of the world. For example, in choosing 15 nonfiction children's books about economics in the United Sates and money management, Goodman (1985) found that all of those identified gave inaccurate information, perpetuated stereotypes, and were obviously pro-capitalism. Children reading these books may gain the misunderstanding that middle- and upper-class families are the norm, and that all people who are poor do not know how to manage their money.

Moreover, many picture books that have characters who are poor fail to identify the various causes of poverty, such as job loss and low minimum wage. Overstreet (2001) found that what was lacking in the literature was a discussion of "the inherent injustices of capitalism, class structure, and the belief in social and economic Darwinism" (p. 65). Also found to be lacking is the structure of the American economic system including social institutions, education, and business (Kelley, Rosenberger, Botelho, 2005) as well as how these structures can perpetuate generational poverty.

Methodology

Utilizing a critical multicultural analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009), this study analyzes children's picture books that portray people living in poverty and compares these depictions to recent statistics from the United States Census Bureau.

"Critical multicultural analysis examines texts against a sociopolitical lens" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 121). In order to unveil the dominant ideologies presented in children's picture books portraying poverty, we addressed four guiding questions: (a) Who is the main character of the book? (b) What is the time era and geographic locale of the story? (c) What are the gender, age, and race of the focal poor character? (d) Who demonstrates action, and what type of action is demonstrated? Specifically, we identify which characters demonstrate action, such as the character who is poor. In regards to the type of action, we identify if the action is done on the individual, community, or systemic level. For example, an action such as giving someone a new pair of shoes might be categorized as an individual action while a community action might be someone working in a soup kitchen and a systemic action might be someone participating in an organized strike.

Book Selection

A comprehensive search was conducted to locate the children's picture books published from 1990 to the present that have poverty as the central theme. Books were identified using the search terms *poverty*, *socioeconomic status, poor, homelessness*, *children's literature*, and *picture books* utilizing the library catalog, web searches, amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, and recommendations from librarians, children's literature professors, and speakers at professional development opportunities and conferences. We reviewed over 100 books, and ultimately selected children's books that share the following criteria: (a) realistic fiction, (b) illustrated picture book, (c) poverty as a central theme, (d) published after 1990, and (e) takes place or appears to take place in the United States.

Data Coding

Both authors individually read each book several times, recorded comments, came together to discuss the books, and completed a data collection chart for each book identified, documenting the following information: (a) author and title, (b) identifies if main character is poor, (c) time era and geographical locale, (d) social identities of the character who is poor (i.e., gender, age, and race), and (e) identifies the person who demonstrates action and the type of action performed (see Table 1). Data was charted and analyzed to see what common trends, themes, and patterns emerged. All percentages were rounded to the nearest tenth. Additionally, data from the 2006-2008 United States Census Bureau was used to compare what is being depicted in children's books to what is actually happening in America today.

Table 1. *Matrix for data of 58 picture books*

Author & Title	Poor/ Main Same	Time Era & Geo Locale	Focal Poor Character	Action (Who/Type)
Altman, 1993 *Amelia's Road*	yes	present rural	female child, parents, Latino	poor individual
Andersen, 1999 *The Little Match Girl*	yes	early 1900s urban	female child, family unclear	poor individual
Barbour, 1991 *Mr. Bow Tie*	no	present urban	male adult White	other individual
Bartone, 1993 *Peppe the Lamplighter*	yes	pre-1900s urban	male child, male adult, family White	poor individual
Baylor, 1994 *The Table Where Rich People Sit*	yes	present rural	female child, parents, family White	poor individual
Boelts, 2007 *Those Shoes*	yes	present urban	male child, female adult African American	poor individual
Bunting, 1991 *Fly Away Home*	yes	present urban	male child, male adult White	poor individual
Bunting, 1994 *A Day's Work*	yes	present urban	male child, male adult Latino	poor individual
Bunting, 1996 *Going Home*	yes	present rural	male child, parents, family Latino	poor individual
Bunting, 1996 *Train to Somewhere*	yes	late 1800s rural	female child White	other community
Carmi, 2003 *A Circle of Friends*	no	present urban	male adult White	other individual
Chinn, 1995 *Sam and the Lucky Money*	no	present urban	male adult Asian	other individual
Cohn, 2002 *¡Si, Se Puede!: Yes, We Can*	yes	present urban	male child, female adult Latino	poor & other systemic
Cooper, 1998 *Gettin' Through Thursday*	yes	present urban	male child, female adult African American	poor individual
DiCamillo, 2007 *Great Joy*	no	mid-1990s urban	adult male White	other individual
DiSalvo, 1994 *City Green*	yes	present urban	female child African American	poor community
DiSalvo, 2001 *A Castle on Viola Street*	yes	present urban	male child, parents, family unclear	poor & other community
DiSalvo-Ryan, 1991 *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen*	no	present urban	multiple	poor & other community

Author & Title	Poor/ Main Same	Time Era & Geo Locale	Focal Poor Character	Action (Who/Type)
Fernlund, 2007 *The Magic Beads*	no	present urban	female child, female adult White	poor individual & community
Friedrich, 1990 *Leah's Pony*	yes	mid-1900s rural	female child, parents White	poor & other individual
Gunning, 2004 *A Shelter in Our Car*	yes	present urban	female child, female adult African American	poor individual
Harper, 2005 *Finding Daddy*	yes	mid-1900s rural	female child, parents White	poor individual
Hathorn, 1994 *Way Home*	yes	present urban	male child White	poor individual
Herrera, 1995 *Calling the Doves*	yes	present rural	male child, parents Latino	poor individual
Hesse, 2008 *Spuds*	yes	mid-1990s rural	female child, male child (2), adult female White	other individual
Hubbard, 2004 *The Lady in the Box*	no	present urban	female adult White	poor & other individual
Kennedy, 2004 *The Pickles Patch Bathtub*	yes	early 1900s rural	female child, parents, family White	poor individual
Ketteman, 2001 *Mama's Way*	yes	present urban	female child, female adult White	poor & other individual
Kidd, 1996 *Building Friends*	yes	present urban	male child, parents White	poor & other community
Lambert, 1995 *Joey's Birthday Wish*	no	present urban	female child, male adult White	poor individual
Levitin, 2007 *Junk Man's Daughter*	yes	mid-1900s urban	female child, parents, family White	poor individual
Lied, 1997 *Potato*	yes	mid-1900s rural	female child, parents White	poor individual
Lyon, 2009 *You and Me and Home Sweet Home*	yes	present urban	female child female adult African American	poor & other individual & community
Martin, 1996 *Rosie: The Shopping Cart Lady*	no	present urban	adult female White	other individual
Maslac, 1996 *Finding a Job for Daddy*	yes	present urban	female child White	poor individual
McCourt, 1998 *Chicken Soup for Little Souls: The Braids Girl*	no	present urban	female child, female adult White	poor & other individual & community
McCully, 1996 *The Bobbin Girl*	yes	1830s urban	female child, female adult White	poor systemic

Author & Title	Poor/ Main Same	Time Era & Geo Locale	Focal Poor Character	Action (Who/Type)
McGovern, 1997 *The Lady in the Box*	no	present urban	female adult White	other individual
McPhail, 2002 *The Teddy Bear*	no	present urban	male adult White	other individual
Medina, 2001 *Christmas Makes Me Think*	no	present urban	multiple	no action
Miller, 1997 *A House by the River*	yes	present rural	female child, female adult African American	poor individual
Mills, 1991 *The Rag Coat*	yes	pre-1900s rural	female child, female adult White	poor & other individual
Mitchell, 1993 *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*	no	1930s rural	male adult African American	poor individual
Noble, 2007 *The Orange Shoes*	yes	mid-1900s rural	female child, parents, family White	poor individual
Parton, 1994 *Coat of Many Colors*	yes	present rural	female child, family White	poor individual
Partridge, 2001 *Oranges on Golden Mountain*	yes	1894 Gold Rush urban	male child, female adult Asian	poor individual
Pérez, 2000 *My Very Own Room*	yes	present unclear	female child, parents, family Latino	poor individual
Seskin & Shamblin, 2006 *A Chance to Shine*	no	present urban	male adult White	poor & other individual
Spohn, 1994 *Broken Umbrellas*	yes	present urban	female adult White	poor individual
Taback, 1999 *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*	yes	pre-1900s rural	male adult White	poor individual
Testa, 1996 *Someplace to Go*	yes	present urban	male child, female adult, family White	poor community
Trottier, 1996 *The Tiny Kite of Eddie Wing*	yes	present urban	male child Asian	other individual
Tunnell, 1997 *Mailing May*	yes	1913 rural	female child, parents White	poor individual
Upjohn, 2007 *Lily and the Paper Man*	no	present urban	adult male White	other individual
Wild, 1992 *Space Travellers*	yes	present urban	male child, female adult White	poor & other individual

Author & Title	Poor/ Main Same	Time Era & Geo Locale	Focal Poor Character	Action (Who/Type)
Williams, 1992 *Working Cotton*	yes	present rural	female child, parents, family African American	poor individual
Williams, 2001 *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart*	yes	present unclear	female child (2), female adult White	poor individual
Wyeth, 1998 *Something Beautiful*	yes	present urban	female child African American	poor individual

Data Analysis

When comparing our results to those of other studies on this topic, much complexity emerges. For example, we did not include nonfiction texts, as Goodman (1985) did, nor chapter books, as did Fitzgibbons and Tilley (1999). Additionally, we did not focus on a specific group, such as Overstreet's (2001) article on labor unions and mill workers, and we utilized different criteria when compared to other studies. In looking critically at picture books portraying poverty published from 1990 to the present and comparing them to recent United States poverty statistics, the following trends emerged.

Focal Character Who is Poor

In some of the books reviewed the main character is poor, whereas in other books, the main character is not poor but interacts with or observes a person in poverty. Often times it was easy to identify the focal poor character because he or she is the main character, and the other characters who are poor are clearly secondary in the story. Because these books are written for children, there are many main focal characters who are children; however, there are also poor adult characters who, although not the main character, do play an integral part of the storyline. For example, in *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991), the story is narrated by the young boy; however, the father is present throughout the majority of the story, and the boy refers to his father and how the two of them survive living in an airport. In this case, we identified both the father and the son as focal poor characters.

Voices Heard

In 43 (72.41%) of the 58 books, the main character is the person who is poor (see Table 2). On one hand, this is promising, as it is good that the people who are poor are given voice and tell their story. Yet it is often indeterminable which authors write from personal experiences making the book more authentic. In this case, we

relied on author bios, notes from the author, and information from the book jacket to verify stories. As such, we could discern only that eight books were written from or alluded to an insider, unbiased perspective. For example, on the jacket cover of *Calling the Doves,* Herrera (1995) tells of his "migrant farmworker childhood." Similarly, *The Pickle Patch Bathtub* (Kennedy & Aldridge, 2004) concludes with an authors' note and photographs describing how the "Philip children grew cucumbers [and]... With the money they earned they purchased a claw-footed bathtub." Although other books may have been based on the authors' lived experiences, they did not specifically indicate this in the book or the book jacket, and therefore the reader does not know if the portrayal is authentic or not.

Table 2. *Main Character & Poor Character*

Main/poor	# Books	% Books	# Books with Author's own experience	% Books with Author's own experience
No	16	27.59	49	84.48
Yes	42	72.41	9	15.52

On the other hand, a story told from a character who is not living in poverty can act as a focalizer and help the reader consider a different point of view. For example, in *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* (DiSalvo, 1991), the boy learns from his Uncle Willie the importance of helping those in need, and realizes that people living in poverty deserve to be treated with respect.

Gender Representation

Our analysis of gender representations of the focal poor character in all books found that the representations of gender and poverty closely match the breakdown of poverty by gender in the United States. Further, we disaggregated the books that depict adults, and found that 20 (60.61%) of the books portray adult females versus 13 (39.39%) books that portray adult males (see Table 3). In actuality, 56.23% of the nation's poor are adult females, and 43.77% of the nation's poor are adult males showing that gender is nearly accurately represented. Finally, we looked at the depiction of adult characters who are homeless in the books. Of the 58 books, 17 books depict characters who are homeless: nine adult females, eight adult males, one book depicts parents, and one book has multiple character representations. Of the nine books depicting adult females, four books tell stories about single moms who are homeless. *A Shelter in Our Car* (Gunning, 2004), shares the story of Zettie and her Mama who are living in their car. Papa has died, and Mama is both working and going to community college. Likewise, *The Magic Beads* (Nielsen-Fernlund, 2007)

shares the story of Lillian, a girl who is concerned about her turn for Show and Tell because she lives in a shelter. "They'd moved into the shelter because he [the father] had a bad temper, and sometimes he hit her [the mother]. They'd left all their things behind including Lillian's toys" (p. 9). Although these stories depict sad situations, they do represent reality for many homeless children in American schools today.

Table 3. *Gender of Focal Poor Character*

Gender - Focal Poor Character	# Books	% Books	% of US pop
Female adults	20	60.61	56.23
Male adults	13	39.39	43.77

Geographic Locale

Of the people living below the poverty level in the United States, 44% live in rural areas, and approximately 56% live in urban/suburban locales (USCB, 2006-2008). However, in the books we analyzed, there was a huge discrepancy. Two of the books had an unclear setting and were disregarded. Of the remaining 56 books, 18 (32.14%) take place in a rural setting, while 38 (67.86%) of the books are set in urban or suburban locations. If we disaggregate the books set in the past from the books set in the present, 82.05% have a present urban/suburban setting, while only 17.95% take place in a present rural setting (see Table 4). In this case, contemporary rural poverty is virtually being ignored.

Table 4. *Geographic Locale & Time Era*

Geographic Locale	# Books	% Books	# Books (Present)	% Books (Present)	% of US population below poverty level
Urban	38	65.52	32	78.05	56
Rural	18	31.03	7	17.07	44
Unclear	2	3.45	2	4.88	

Many of the contemporary stories depict characters in urban and suburban settings where people are living on the streets, in shelters, in their cars, or in apartments and homes. For example, *Someplace to Go* (Testa, 1996) chronicles a day in the life of a boy whose family lives in the local shelter. As the shelter does not open until eight o'clock p.m., and needing to occupy his time after school, he goes to the market and library, as well as tries to avoid people selling drugs on the street. Another contemporary portrayal is seen in *Mama's Way* (Ketteman, 2001) which has a more suburban setting and shares how Sarah's mother cannot afford to buy

her the new dress she desires for graduation from the local dress shop. One of the few examples depicting contemporary rural poverty is *A House by the River* (Miller, 1997). In this book, Belinda and her mother worry each time the rains come because their house is built in the low lands. The story implies that the family cannot afford to move into town where the houses are safe, having been built on hilltops.

Race/Ethnicity

An analysis of the portrayal of race is very complicated. In looking at sheer numbers, the United States Census Bureau (2006-2008) shows that there are more White people living in poverty in the United States than any other racial group. However, if one looks at the percentage of people living below the poverty line within racial groups, the statistics change (see Table 5). For instance, of the total number of poor people living in the United States, 46.06% are White; however, of all of the White people living in the United States, only 9.2% are poor. Also, while only 1.5% of the poor people living in the United States are Native Americans, within that population, 25.3% are living in poverty. In other words, one out of 10 White people live in poverty versus one out of four Native Americans living in poverty.

Table 5. *Race of Focal Poor Character vs. US Population Statistics*

Focal Poor Character	# Books	% Books	% of US pop	% within group
Native Americans	0	0	1.53	25.30
Asian	3	5.567	3.56	10.6
African American	9	16.67	22.68	24.7
Latino/a	6	11.11	24.48	21.2
Native Hawaiian	0	0	0.18	15.9
White (not Latino)	36	66.67	46.06	9.20
Multiple	2	N/A		
Unclear	2	N/A		

Our findings regarding representation of race differed from previous publications located on this topic for several reasons. After eliminating three books because the race was unclear, some of the more substantial differences found are as follows. While Fitzgibbons and Tilley (1999) found no portrayals of Asian Americans who are poor in children's picture books, we located three such representations, totaling 5.56% of the books analyzed. As only 3.56% of the nation's poor are Asian American (USCB, 2006-2008), it would seem that in actuality, this group is somewhat over-represented in children's literature.

Similarly contradictory, Jones (2008) found that most of the children's books about working class and poor children depict African Americans and Latino families, and she posits that the underrepresentation of poor White characters in children's books perpetuates the stereotype of race being related to socioeconomic status. However, we found 36 (66.67%) of the books portraying the poor character as White, non-Hispanic, which is disproportionately over-representative of the actual 46.06% of the Caucasian poor among our nation's population (USCB, 2006-2008). Conversely, African Americans were slightly underrepresented, with nine (16.67%) of the picture books displaying African American poor compared to 22.68% of the actual total in society today (USCB, 2006-2008). With regards to the Latino population, we found six (11.11%) books, which is below the 24.48% of White-Hispanic people currently living below the poverty level (USCB, 2006-2008). We did not find any books with poverty as a central theme that depicted Native Americans. Arguably, since only 1.53% of the people living in poverty are Native Americans (USCB, 2006-2008), it could be justified that they are not represented in children's books. We suggest that on one hand, when one out of four Native Americans lives in poverty, this presents a gap in representation. But, on the other hand, many Native American authors strive to create literature that presents positive portrayals of their culture and community thus they may choose not to portray that statistic.

Action

An action is "doing something; or something done especially for a particular purpose" (Procter, 1995). For this study, we further disseminated this definition to identify both who is doing the action as well as what kind of action and for what purpose the action is being done. Of the 58 books, 34 (59.65%) of the focal characters who are poor demonstrate some type of action (see Table 6). At first glance this may seem admirable in that the characters are represented as resourceful and self-reliant. However, it is important to examine action at a deeper level as in the case of poverty, action can take place on three levels: the individual, community level, and systemic, and may range from simple day-to-day survival to making changes in the way businesses are structured.

Table 6. *Who Demonstrates the Action?*

Action (Who)	# Books	% Books
Other	11	19.30
Other and Poor	12	21.05
Poor	34	59.65
No Action	1	N/A

In the books we analyzed, most of the action (80.7%) was done at the individual level, with only two (3.51%) of the books (one taking place in the past and one in the present) displaying action at the systemic level (see Table 7). One book, *Christmas Makes Me Think* (Medina, 2001), suggests actions that the individual and community members could take; however, these are just some of the many thoughts the main character has at Christmas time. "Christmas makes me think that I should share my presents with kids that don't have any. And get my friends to share too" (p. 19). In this case, we coded the book as "no action" in the category of action and we did not include the book in the overall statistics for that category.

Table 7. *Type of Action Demonstrated*

Action (Type)	# Books	% Books
Community	6	10.53
Individual	46	80.70
Individual and community	3	5.26
Systemic	2	3.51
No action	1	N/A

When individual action was disaggregated by who performs it (the individual who is poor or an outside person), there were 29 (52.3%) books in which the character who is poor individually performs actions to sustain or obtain basic necessities, education, employment, and/or improvement of his or her surroundings (see Table 8).

Table 8. *Who Demonstrates the Action? & Type of Action Demonstrated*

Action (Type)	# Books	% Books
Poor/individual	29	52.3
Poor/community	2	3.51
Poor/individual/community	1	1.75
Poor/systemic	1	1.75
Other/individual	11	17.54
Other/community	1	1.75
Other/systemic	0	0
Poor/other/individual	6	10.53
Poor/other/community	3	5.26
Poor/other/systemic	1	1.75
Poor/other/individual/community	2	3.51
No Action	1	N/A

While it is good to see portrayals of individuals enacting change, this does have potential for being problematic as it can reinforce the notion that people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and that poverty is an individual problem that can be solved with some effort by individuals, rather than that poverty is a national, structural, and systemic problem.

When analyzing for action at the community level, a total of nine (15.79%) books show individuals working within their communities to assist those in poverty. Working at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, working with Habitat for Humanity, and community beautification projects are a few of the community actions represented in these books. One such example is in *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998). In this book, a little girl is able to enact change in her own surroundings by cleaning up the courtyard by her house.

> I go upstairs and get a broom and a sponge and some water. I pick up the trash. I sweep up the glass. I scrub the door very hard. When *Die* disappears, I feel powerful. Someday I'll plant flowers in my courtyard. I'll invite all my friends to see. (p. 25)

Similarly, in *City Green,* DiSalvo-Ryan (1994) shows the theme of one child enacting change in her community through a beautification project.

> I walk him past the hollyhocks, the daisies, the peppers, the rows of lettuce. I show him the strawberries that I planted. When Old Man Hammer sees his little garden bed, his sour grapes turn sweet. "Marcy, child." He shakes his head. "This lot was good for nothin'. Now it's nothin' but good," he says. (p. 26)

These depictions send children the message that they *can* enact change, and that even a small action can make a difference.

Only two (3.51%) of the books demonstrated action taking place at the systemic level. *The Bobbin Girl* (McCully, 1996) is one book that demonstrates the need for and attempts to create systemic change. Taking place in the Industrial Age and telling the story of working factory girls, *The Bobbin Girl* shows a failed attempt to get fair wages.

> "The turnout failed," Judith said. "There are too many girls like Huldah who feel they must work. I'm going to find a position in another town." Rebecca gasped. It was as if she'd been hit by a flying shuttle. Judith had led her into battle, and now she was deserting! Judith saw her expression and said gently, "We are not defeated, Rebecca. We showed we can stand up for what is right. Next time, or the time after, we will win." (p.29)

Despite the failure to enact the change, the story shows the bravery and strength of the women who fought for their rights as well as the relentless pursuit of change for the betterment of the group. The actions of these women in the past paved the way for future successful strikes and became a source of hope and a model for future working class people. Showing a failed attempt, *The Bobbin Girl* illustrates that change at the systemic level often takes time, patience, and persistence.

Written in both English and Spanish, and inspired by events in Los Angeles in 2000 when 8,000 janitors went on strike and successfully established a contract that provided a living wage, *¡Si, Se Puede!: Yes, We Can!* (Cohn, 2002) is another book that demonstrates action at a systemic level. This book focuses on the power of Latina immigrant women working alongside other members of the Los Angeles community, affecting change for both themselves and their neighbors.

> On the sidewalk, people rooted for all of us marchers on the street. There were thousands of people all around me! I held on tight to Miss Lopez' hand. "Carlos," she said, "this is a celebration of courage." After three long weeks, the strike was over. My mama and the janitors finally got the respect and the pay raises they deserved. (p. 23)

Both books show that change at a more systemic level can happen. The difference between the two books is that *¡Si Se Puede!: Yes, We Can!* demonstrates collective action, people who are poor working with others to enact change, whereas in *The Bobbin Girl* it is only the working women who are trying to enact change for themselves.

Implications & Recommendations

Although teachers may feel hesitant to teach about poverty, Chafel (1997) reminds us that young children "are cognizant of social and economic inequality" (p. 368). In today's economic crisis, teachers may want to be more explicit in teaching about poverty and homelessness, and we contend that it is never too early to start. For example, Chafel, Flint, Hammel, and Pomroy (2007) share four personal accounts about classroom teachers who incorporated literature about poverty as a springboard for critical literacy discussions and artwork in primary grades. The authors provide a few general suggestions such as, "Ask children to bring in or represent images of poverty in their drawings. Use these images as conversation starters" (p. 80). Similarly, Dutro (2009) details how literature about poverty can be used as a vehicle for students to write and share about their own lived experiences and understandings of "hard times" (p.89). Children's literature about poverty can also be used as a springboard for thoughts and discussions about social justice. Finally,

there are numerous resources which offer suggestions for curriculum implementations (e.g., Project Hope, 2006 and Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

Additionally, when creating a classroom library, it is important that teachers intentionally choose and include books that accurately represent both the diffusion of poverty in the United States and the diversity within his or her classroom. Children who live in poverty need to have opportunities to see themselves reflected in classroom literature, and children who are not poor need to read these books to gain empathy and recognize that poverty exists in society today. To these means, books that have both male and female focal poor characters and that represent a variety of races and both urban and rural geographic locations should be included. In addition to sharing books which represent different social identities, it is important to find books that present different perspectives on poverty. For example, *The Table Where Rich People Sit* (Baylor, 1994) shows individual action through poverty as a choice as the characters in this book have chosen jobs that result in a life of poverty because they view "wealth" as having the opportunity to work outside rather than to have monetary wealth.

While selections that depict individual action are good to show students that they can personally make positive changes in their own lives and in the lives of others, we strongly believe that books that address the need for systemic change or that show such change in action (e.g. *¡Si Se Puede!: Yes, We Can!)* should be included in every classroom library. Also, though we did not include works of nonfiction in our analysis, factual works can also be paired with picture books to more fully develop both the reality of poverty and the lives it often affects. Finally, as books are being published every day, it is important that teachers continually look for new releases that portray issues of poverty and homelessness.

This study is clearly just one small way of looking at representations of poverty in children's picture books. Further studies should be conducted that look at different types of picture books (e.g. nonfiction, those that contain supernatural elements) from those we targeted. Also, children's chapter books and young adult literature should also be analyzed. Comparisons among the different types of literature can give more insight into the current representations and trends that exist in literature about poverty that is written for children and young adults.

Conclusion

With 18.2% (U.S. Census, 2006-2008) of all children in the United States living below the poverty level, it is increasingly important that teachers include literature about poverty in the classroom. While it is heartening to see that there

are multiple books on the topic that accurately and realistically depict the current economic state of many in our nation, there are still many gaps that need to be filled. Specifically, more books that depict contemporary rural poverty and those that address systemic change need to written. And while several books show individuals making a difference in their own homes and communities, social acts such as boycotting, union organizing, restructuring business (Kelley et al., 2005), and working together at a community level to enact change are rarely offered to children as means by which to make a difference in their world. We strongly believe that presenting students with the truth about today's economic crisis using children's picture books is one small step teachers can take in educating tomorrow's leaders of the need for acceptable living standards and opportunities for all people.

References

American Human Development Project. (2009). *Factoids*, from http://measureofamerica.org/2008-2009-report/factoids/

Botelho, M. J., & Rudman, M. K. (2009). *Mirrors, windows, and doors: A critical multicultural analysis of children's literature*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Chafel, J. A. (1997). Children's views of poverty: A review of research and implications for teaching. *The Educational Forum, 61*, 360-371.

Chafel, J. A., Fitzgibbons, S. A., Cutter, L., & Burke-Weiner, K. (1997). Poverty in books for young children: A content analysis. *Early Child Development and Care, 139*, 13-27.

Chafel, J. A., Flint, A. S., Hammel, J., & Pomeroy, K. H. (2007). Young children, social issues, and critical literacy stories of teachers and researchers. *Young Children, 62(1)*, 73-82.

Dixon, B. (1977). *Catching them young*. London: Pluto Press.

Dutro, E. (2009). Children writing "Hard Times": Lived experiences of poverty and the class-privileged assumptions of a mandated curriculum. *Language Arts, 87(2)*, 89-98.

Federal Register. (2009). (Vol. 74, pp. 4199-4201).

Fitzgibbons, S. A., & Tilley, C. L. (1999, November). *Images of poverty in contemporary realistic fiction for youth: Preliminary results of a content analysis using a social psychological conceptual framework.* Paper presented at the Third International Forum on Research in School Librarianship, annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship, Birmingham, AL.

Goodman, J. M. (1985). From lemonade stands to Wall Street: Children's books' messages about the economy. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, 16(2/3)*, 4-9.

Jones, S. (2008). Grass houses: Representations and reinventions of social class through children's literature. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education, 4(2)*, 40-58.

Kelley, J. E., Rosenberger, C., & Botelho, M. J. (2005). Recurring themes about poverty in realistic fiction picture books. *The Dragon Lode, 24(1)*, 25-30.

Lamme, L. L. (2000). Images of poverty in picture books with international settings. *The New Advocate, 13(4)*, 347-364.

Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless. (2009). Retrieved January 26, 2011 from http://www.mnhomelesscoalition.org/resources/curriculum/

Overstreet, D. W. (2001). Organize!: A look at labor history in young adult books. *The Alan Review, 29(1)*, 60-66.

Procter, P. (1995). *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Project Hope. (2006). *Bibliography of Homeless Education Resources*, from http://web.wm.edu/hope/infobrief/bibliography.pdf?svr=www

U.S. Census Bureau: American FactFinder. (2006-2008). *S1701. Poverty status in the past 12 months*, from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_S1701&-ds_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_&-redoLog=false

Children's Picture Books

Altman, L. J. (1993). *Amelia's road*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

Barbour, K. (1991). *Mr. Bow Tie*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Bunting, E. (1991). *Fly away home*. New York: Clarion Books.

Bunting, E. (1996a). *Going home*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Bunting, E. (1996b). *Train to somewhere*. New York: Clarion Books.

Bunting, E. (1994). *A day's work*. New York: Clarion Books.

Carmi, G. (2003). *A circle of friends*. New York: Star Bright Books.

Chinn, K. (1995). *Sam and the lucky money*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

Cohn, D. (2002). *¡Sí, se puede! Yes, we can!: Janitor strike in L.A*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.

Cooper, M. (1998). *Gettin' through Thursday*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

DiCamillo, K. (2007). *Great joy*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

DiSalvo, D. (1994). *City green*. New York: Morrow Junior Books.

DiSalvo, D. (2001). *A castle on Viola Street*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

DiSalvo-Ryan, D. (1991). *Uncle Willie and the soup kitchen*. New York: Morrow Junior Books.

Friedrich, E. (1996). *Leah's pony*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.

Gunning, M. (2004). *A shelter in our car*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.

Harper, J., & Harper, J. (2005). *Finding daddy: A story of the Great Depression*. New York: Turtle Books.

Hathorn, E. (1994). *Way home*. New York: Crown.

Herrera, J. F. (1995). *Calling the doves (El canto de las palomas)*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.

Hesse, K. (2008). *Spuds*. New York: Scholastic Press.

Kennedy, F., & Aldridge, S. (2004). *The pickle patch bathtub*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

Ketteman, H. (2001). *Mama's way*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Kidd, R. (1996). *Building friends*. Americus, GA: Habitat for Humanity.

Lambert, M. (1995). *Joey's birthday wish*. Austin, TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn.

Levitin, S. (2007). *Junk man's daughter*. Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press.

Lied, K. (1997). *Potato: A tale from the Great Depression*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society: Distributed by Publishers Group West.

Lyon, G. E. (2009). *You and me and home sweet home*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Martin, C. (1996). *Rosie, the shopping cart lady*. Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press.

Maslac, E. (1996). *Finding a job for Daddy*. Morton Grove, IL: A. Whitman.

McCourt, L. (1998). *Chicken soup for little souls: The braids girl*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.

McCully, E. A. (1996). *The bobbin girl*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

McGovern, A. (1997). *The lady in the box*. New York: Turtle Books.

McPhail, D. (2002). *The teddy bear*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Medina, T. (2001). *Christmas makes me think*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

Miller, W. (1997). *A house by the river*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

Mills, L. A. (1991). *The rag coat*. Boston: Little Brown.

Mitchell, M. K. (1993). *Uncle Jed's barbershop*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Nielsen-Fernlund, S. (2007). *The magic beads*. Verona, NJ: Simply Read Books.

Noble, T. H. (2007). *The orange shoes*. Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press.

Parton, D. (1994). *Coat of many colors*. New York: HarperCollins.

Partridge, E. (2001). *Oranges on Golden Mountain*. New York: Dutton Children's Books.

Pérez, A. I. (2000). *My very own room*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

Seskin, S., & Shamblin, A. (2005). *A chance to shine*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

Spohn, K. (1994). *Broken umbrellas*. New York: Viking.

Taback, S. (1999). *Joseph had a little overcoat*. New York: Viking.

Testa, M. (1996). *Someplace to go*. Morton Grove, IL: A. Whitman.

Trottier, M. (1996). *The tiny kite of Eddie Wing*. Brooklyn, NY: Kane/Miller Book Publishers.

Upjohn, R. (2007). *Lily and the paper man*. Toronto: Second Story Press.

About the Authors

Jane E. Kelley, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor at Washington State University where she is the Reading Endorsement Coordinator and instructs courses in Children's Literature, Reading Comprehension, and Sociocultural Foundations of Literacy. She taught ESL at all levels for two years in Massachusetts; primary grades for three years at schools in inner city Houston; and various grade levels for five years in Missouri. Dr. Kelley's research interests are critical multicultural analysis of children's literature, instructional strategies of children's literature, and teacher education.

Janine J. Darragh, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at Whitworth University in Spokane, WA, where she is the Secondary Coordinator of the Master in Teaching Program and instructs courses in Diversity and Social Justice, Teaching Methods, Reading and Writing across the Disciplines, and Differentiation for ELLs and Exceptional Learners. Her research interests are sociocultural issues in adolescent literacy, young adult and children's literature, and teacher education.