



## Representation and the Portrayal of Elders' Characters in Ethiopian Children's Books: Policy Implication

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this study was to investigate the Representation and the Portrayal of Elders' Characters in Ethiopian Children's Books. To achieve this intention, three different publishers were purposively taken, Mega Enterprise, Aster Nega, and Royal, for the books do have large sellers for children's present day in Ethiopia. Therefore, 38 different books were gathered from selected independent bookstores and taken from wholesalers along availability sampling technique. A coding sheet was utilized to assist in recording data. The information used to establish this recording aid was adapted from Robinson and Anderson's (2006) content analyses on older characters. The gathered data under the help of three oriented experts were coded and statistically analyzed (using frequency and percentage). Thus, the study found that the elders' character mostly appeared in children's picture books. Further, the most of the elders' characteristics were found to be positive in nature in the sample picture books. In addition to this, both physical and social basis characteristics of elders were found to be represented and portrayed in Ethiopian children's picture books. Based on these results, it has been concluded that Ethiopian children's picture books represented and portrayed elders' characteristics prevalently and positively which in turn indicates the good and acceptable place that elders do have in Ethiopian children's picture books. However, this study found that the characteristics of the books that represented and portrayed undermined the additional characteristic of elders with special needs. Further, the characters that presented and portrayed in those picture books may not yet included in to academic textbooks of students. Therefore, it has been recommended that the publishers, the educational experts, and the readers as well as the researchers should enforce the concerned bodies to include the elderly characteristics of individuals with special needs (particularly of those with disabilities) in to the readable picture books and should evaluate the contents of academic textbooks.

**Keywords:** *Characteristics; Children's Pictures Books; Elders*

### **1. Introduction**

Ageing could be defined as any physical and/or psychological deterioration of a person. That means, generally ageing refers to the process of becoming older. In human, therefore, ageing represents the accumulation of changes in human being over time, encompassing physical, psychological and social changes. Because these age-based progressive changes ageing determine the social nature of ageing individual in the society they live. This indicates that societal values and other factors determine the value that is attributed to aging within society. For this reason, aging clearly shares social and cultural contexts (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

Further, different scholars and organization categorize human ageing based on their own social contexts and values. The World Health Organization, for instance, categorized human's age as middle age ranges from 45-59, elderly age ranges from 60-74 or 75-89 as old, 90+ as very old. Based on this, most educational researches consider individuals between the ages of 40 and 65 to be middle-aged, and above 76 to be elderly (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

Now a day, though the countries have different statistics, world's countries are becoming flooded by ageing population. For example, before a century, in United States there were only three million people over the age of 65 while in 2007 it up graded to more than 34 million. Based on this, researchers estimated that by the year 2020, more than 20% of the world population will be older than 65. A secret behind this increment is identified as the scientists and medical doctors found different new medical and technological ways to treat and/or cure illnesses whereas more people are living longer lives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008; Robinson & Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, it was concluded that nearly 5% (sharing small amount) of African populations more than 65 years; 21% and 7-9% of more than 65 years live in Europe and other developing world's respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2005). Generally, all over the world, the population of aged people is projected to increase by 2030. For Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, it was projected to increase to 67 million by 2030 and 10.4 percent in 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

In our country, Ethiopia, almost 5% of the total population is 60 years and above. Of this, 15% live in urban whereas the rest 85% live in rural of the country. This number was projected to increase to 7% percent in 2030. This makes Ethiopia the second largest country with population over 60 years in the continent next to Nigeria (Central Statistical Authority, 2007).

All the above empirical reports could be concluded that the number of elderly people is larger and is estimated that it will be projected to increase in the future all over the world including our nation. However, gerontological researches are reporting that most people know little about aging; even their little knowledge is centered on mistaken beliefs about the elderly; most individuals' knowledge about the facts given about the elderly population is very little (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

Further, the constant increasing numbers of the elderly adult population makes necessary situations for young individuals to comprehend their own aging process and cultivate a different attitude towards elderly people (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Negative stereotypes, for instance, about age that pervade society influence not only elderly people but also the younger generations (Robinson, Callister, Magoffin & Moore, 2007). Studies carried out on the subject of ageism revealed that attitudes including shunning elderly people and refusing to work with them have come to pervade the current society, particularly children as young as four. Therefore, if both ageism and an understanding towards age have its basis in the early age of the individuals, the knowledge and attitude of the individual on the subject may be ameliorated through the education offered in schools (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005).

However, a study result emphasized the fact that there is no existing course in primary schools regarding aging and whereby improving the attitudes of the young children (Children 's Book

Council, 2002) in most world countries. As students do not receive any kind of education on the subject of aging in schools, therefore, they internalize the prejudices of society and indulge in ageism deliberately (Blunk & Williams, 1997). A study result indicated that education on the subject must begin in early childhood (ages 5-7) in order to equip children with positive knowledge about (and positive attitudes towards) aging (Gooden, & Gooden, 2001). Furthermore, textbooks are the critical tools to shape the attitudes children towards age and ageing. Because of this, ageism in our world basis books children including school textbooks. A study carried out in Taiwan schools concluded that from a total of 44 books used only 4% focus on aging where only 2% percent devotes ageing; the depictions of elderly men and women in the books are not pointed out gender-equal (Blunk & Williams, 1997).

The aim of the present study, therefore, was to investigate to what extent and how Ethiopian children's school textbooks portrayed elders' characteristics. Therefore, the study is significant and valuable for two reasons: national literature has no antecedent of this sort and the study will bring a new perspective to extant literature on textbooks. It is also important and valuable since it will be reflective of societal attitudes towards the elderly, as well as the problems which must be faced as a consequence of an ever-expanding elderly population within the changing fabric of society.

### *1.2. Statement of the Problem*

We may think that the elderly population are fairly represented in student's text books and portrayed with absolutely positive terms. Of course, we observe while they are presented positively on child rearing practices and experience sharing in social activities. However, little is known on how the elderly were represented and portrayed in student's text books especially on their demographic portrayals, physical characteristics, and state of health, personality traits, and situational aspects of choice, dependency, and conveyance of the concept of aging people. Especially in educational environment, the way these themes and contents build, the stereotypical message they convey and the perceptions they create in the mind of our children are very important. Because the messages that student's text books convey about the elderly may not only encourage children and adults to look forward to this period of life, but also affect children's perception of that specific stage either positively or negatively.

Hence, it is a vital for parents, educators and anyone involved with young children to be conscious of the themes and contents included in student's text books. In our country, even though there are few researches conducted on aging people, there is scarcity of research that focuses on the way elderly are presented in student's text books. For example, Belay (2005) conducted research on the living arrangements for older people in Ethiopia only focused on the economic problems of older people. Similarly, Kifle (2002) conducted a research focused on the livelihood of older people. Furthermore, Dawit Mekonnen and Haftu Hindeya (2012) tried to analyze the Ethiopian Civic and Ethical Education and History Textbooks' on the portrayal of group identity and students' perspectives on their contributions in shaping identity which has limited in scope (only two textbooks) and ignored the role of the textbooks do have on building the attitudes of the citizens towards elderly people. Therefore, it seems there is scarcity of research findings that focus on the way the elderly will be represented and portrayed in text books in general and in children's text books in particular. Therefore, the objective of this project to fill gaps we observe on representation and the portrayal of older characters in primary student's text books through searching answers for the basic questions stated here under.

1. How often elder people's characteristics do appear in Ethiopian children's picture books?

2. Are there positive or Negative portrayals of older characters in Ethiopian children's picture books?
3. Which characteristics of elderly in Ethiopian children's picture books mostly dominant?

## 2. *Materials*

### 2.1. *Sample*

The core sample selected for this investigation was derived from the three different publishers in Ethiopia such as Mega Enterprise, Aster Nega, and Royal for the books published by commenced best sellers for children's picture books to present day in Ethiopia). The books were gathered from selected independent bookstores, as well as wholesalers along availability sampling. Furthermore, once a publication achieves the sellers often display the book in more prominent areas. Due to these factors along with its widespread popularity, many view this list as the preeminent publication for the best-selling books within the country. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that books associated with this record reflect what Ethiopian audiences, children, are reading and the messages they are receiving from the books. With the compilation of The Three Publishing Enterprises a total of 38 books were analyzed in this exploration.

### 2.2. *Measuring Instrument*

In order to note observed patterns of elder adults' characteristics within children's picture books, a coding sheet was utilized to assist in recording data. The information used to establish this aid was formulated and adapted from Robinson and Anderson's (2006) content analyses on older characters in animated television programs geared toward children. All characters that are physically depicted over the age of 55 were coded as older. Criteria utilized for determining if a character was over the age of 55 included the following characteristics: (1) extensive gray or white hair, (2) wrinkles or sagging of the skin, (3) apparent loss of hair or balding, (4) the parent of a son or daughter who is depicted as middle aged or older, (5) evidence of grandchildren or great-grandchildren, (6) use of a physical aid such as a cane or wheelchair, (7) use of glasses or a magnifying glass. In order to be deemed: old, the character had to exemplify two or more of the described attributes unless the individual was specifically categorized as: old in the text; Young old(ages 55 to 64); middle old (ages 65-74), and: old old (age 75 and older) were classified in relation to the quantity of wrinkles present in the illustrated image (young old characters had few to no wrinkles: middle old characters exhibited limited to moderate wrinkles; old old characters were depicted with moderate to heavy wrinkles; ), along with any description indicators present in the content of the illustrated work. For instance, if a character was described as old with moderate wrinkles, this character was defined as middle old. Likewise, descriptors such as ancient, very old, and/or great-great grandmother placed characters in the old old category. In addition, characters were only coded if depicted within the foreground of an illustration where their physical traits were obvious to an audience. If major physical traits were difficult to identify (i.e. gender, age, degree of wrinkles, etc.), the character was excluded from the sample.

## 3. *Analysis and Presentation of the Data*

### 3.1. *Analyzing General Characteristics Identified in Sampled Ethiopian Children's Books*

The first basic research question addressed the total number of older characters that appeared in the selected children 's picture book sample. In response to this inquiry, there were a total of 114general human characters assessed from which **63 (56%)** coded as older characters. Once a character was identified as being older, the character's age was assessed. The given sample indicated that majority of

older characters were depicted with characteristics in the range of middle old age ranges from 65-74 (47.6%) qualities. As it has been identified under the background this age had categorized under elder labeling.

**Table 1: Age of Elders Represented in the Sampled Ethiopian Children's Books**

Age Classification	<i>f</i>	%
Young Old (55-64 years old)	12	19.1
Middle Old (65-74 years old)	21	33.3
Old Old (75+years old )	30	47.6

### 3.2. Analyzing the Portrayed Characteristics of the Elders in the Sample Books

#### RQ3: Roles of Older Characters in Children's Picture Books

The first point addressed by this study was to discuss elders' characteristic identified as major roles that they play in their society (see Table 2). As it is possible to interpret, therefore, from the table, 28.3% (friend) was identified as the primary role of the elders' character. Furthermore, the revealed character roles included grandparent (17.5%) and Indeterminate (14.3%) while in other roles (14.3%) such as a person(s) of knowledge, goddess, wise man, advisor or a good neighbor were found. However, other characteristics such as being a boss, teacher, husband or wife and villain shared small percentage from the generally identified elderly characters in the sampled books. This may indicate that most elders do not want to act as boss or the head the house rather than acting as being generative individuals in their life after the elderly age.

**Table 2: Primary Roles Portrayed by Older Characters**

Primary role	Total characters	Percentage
Indeterminate	9	14.3
Grandparent	11	17.5
Friend	18	28.3
Other	9	14.3
Worker	7	11.1
Boss	4	6.3
Teacher	2	3.1
Husband/wife	2	3.1
Villain	1	2

#### RQ4: Physical Characteristics of Older Characters in Children's Picture Books

RQ3 evaluated the physical characteristics of the analyzed elders' character found in the sampled children's books. In terms of overall physical appearance, the majority of the elders' characters coded were depicted as moderate or average looking 41(65%) while only 22(35%) were portrayed as more attractive. Table 3 illustrates the specific physical characteristics of older characters in the sampled picture books. The most common physical characteristic portrayed was of facial gray/white (81%); hair color from which 79.3% identified as gray hair; from facial hair characteristic 68% was indicated no facial hair; to see the visual character of elders it is found that 60% do not use glasses whereas the other common physical characteristics identified were being bald that shared 27%. Physical aids observed were all illustrated in association to physical movements were canes and wheelchairs that respectively shared about 5% and 2% of the total sampled elder's characteristics.

**Table 3: Physical Traits of the Elders' Characters**

Physical trait	Observed trait	<i>f</i>	%
Hair color	Gray hair	50	79.3
	Not gray	8	12.7
	Partial gray hair	5	8
Hair status	Full hair	28	43
	Indeterminate	18	29
	Bald/ balding	17	27
Facial hair	Facial hair	43	68
	No Facial hair (bear and/mustache)	20	32
Facial hair color	Gray/white	51	81
Teeth	Indeterminate	18	29
	Has teeth	12	19
Glasses	No glasses	38	60
	Glasses	25	40
Use of physical aid	Presence of physical aid		
	Cane	3	5
	Wheelchair	1	2
	Walker	-	-
	Staff	-	-
	Brace	-	-

**RQ5: Level of Activity for Elders' Characters in Children's Picture Books**

In terms of overall health, the majority 84% of older characters in the selected sample picture books were portrayed in good health while only 16% characters exhibited as having poor health. Thus, from the perspective of activity level 80% characters were depicted as being active whereas 11% characters found as very active, and 4% characters were portrayed as being inactive.

**Table 4: Activity Level for Older Characters**

Level activity	<i>f</i>	%
Active	<b>51</b>	<b>81</b>
Very active	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>
Indeterminate	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
Inactive	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>

**RQ6: Personality Characteristics of Elders' Characters in Children's Picture Books**

As previously discussed, characteristics associated with the elders' interactions with others and overall emotional state was recorded via a character personality assessment checklist. As Table 5 outlines, the top three most prevalent personality traits of elders' characters investigated where 80% characters was found to be friendly; 56% characters were identified as happy/content, and 17% characters were revealed loving/caring in nature.

**Table 5: Personality Traits of Elders' Characters**

Personality type	<i>f</i>	%
Friendly	<b>51</b>	<b>80</b>
Happy/content	<b>35</b>	<b>56</b>
Loving/ caring	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>
Intelligent/wise	<b>9</b>	<b>14</b>
Angry/grumpy/stern	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>
Eccentric	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>
Sad	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
Helpless	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Object of ridicule	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Senile/crazy	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Lonely/recluse	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Humorous	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Dirty	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Nosey	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

### RQ7: Overall Portrayal of Elders' Characters in Popular Children's Picture Books

In comparison to television and film, picture book illustrations were a medium less conducive to developing stereotypes, especially when the majority of characters were minor. Consequently, physical and personality traits were used to evaluate overall portrayal. Coders were able to rate each character as positive, neutral, or negative based on these traits. The results for this indicate that 35 (55%) characters were portrayed with positive characteristics, 18(28%) with neutral characteristics, and 11 (17%) with negative characteristics. Because a neutral character is considered average and accurate in depiction, it is not classified as a negative portrayal. Therefore, neutral assessments were combined with positive observations, leading to an overall positive evaluation of 82.8% (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Overall Portrayal of Older Characters**

Portrayal classification	<i>f</i>	%
Positive	<b>35</b>	<b>55</b>
Neutral	<b>18</b>	<b>28</b>
Negative	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>
Positive/neutral	<b>52</b>	<b>83</b>

### Conclusions

The major intention of this study was to investigate the portrayal of elders' humanistic characteristics included in Ethiopian children's books. From the 114 identified humanistic characteristics in the sampled Ethiopian children's books, more than half 55.2% were found to be specifically display the humanistic characteristics of Ethiopian elders. To make more specific, the age ranges from 55-75+ was taken as elderly age for it basis Ethiopian tradition. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to conclude the finding of this study on the three basic research questions: How often elder people's characteristics do appear in Ethiopian children's picture books? Are there positive or Negative portrayals of older characters in Ethiopian children's picture books? Which characteristics of elderly in Ethiopian children's picture books mostly dominant?

Based on the finding of the study, now it is time to conclude for these major identified inquiries. Firstly, the study found that the Ethiopian children's picture books portray a number of humanistic characteristics where the elders' characteristics share more than half (55.2%) of the 114 characteristics.

This indicates that Ethiopian children's picture books more emphasized the characters of elders to teach children from the life and characters the elders. That means, the books repeatedly portrayed the elders' humanistic characteristics either in picture or in word or in both forms. Therefore, the elders' characteristics share more than half of the characteristic of human beings displayed in Ethiopian children's picture books.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian children's picture books were observed as they positively portrayed elders' characteristics. This leads us to conclude that Ethiopia children's books gave respect for elders' characters. Beyond this purpose, the Ethiopian children's picture books gave due attention to children's attitude and emotions towards elders' humanistic characteristic and to build their own future elderly characters. Because this may help the Ethiopian children to positively accept their own for coming ageing life. Generally, it is possible to conclude that almost all portrayed elders' characters found in Ethiopian children's picture books are positive characteristics.

Moreover, the most prevalent characteristics of elders that portrayed in children's picture books includes friendly, grandparent, being wise, and being good neighborhood from social characteristic while from the primary roles being active shared more prevalence. Additionally, from the physical characteristics of elder's gray hair, facial hairs, and non-use of glass, were the most prevalent characteristics of elders depicted in Ethiopian children's picture books. This indicates that Ethiopian children's picture books mostly use observable and measureable elders' characteristics to easily teach children.

Finally, the study found those most Ethiopian children's picture books are exemplary books to teach good values, positive attitude, good emotion particularly in facilitating attachment among Ethiopian children and elder people. This supports that most Ethiopian children like to hear story from elders than from other individuals. This may be because of the elders positively and friendly approaches the children.

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