

THE PORTRAYAL OF JAPANESE AMERICANS
IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS (1980-1999)

by
Ellen Caskie Decker

A Master's paper submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in
Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

April, 2002

Approved by:

Advisor

Ellen Caskie Decker. *The Portrayal of Japanese Americans in Children's Picture Books (1980-1999)*. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2002. 36 pages. Advisor: Brian Sturm

The purpose of this research was to examine children's picture books about contemporary Japanese Americans. This study addressed the question, How has the portrayal of Japanese Americans and Japanese American culture as presented in children's picture books changed since the 1980's? Using content analysis, the characters, values, and cultural details presented in recently published texts were compared to the findings of the Council on Interracial Books for Children's 1976 study of Asian American images in children's literature. The findings of this study showed that the stereotypes denounced by the CIBC no longer seem to be perpetuated. The majority of characters are multidimensional and are portrayed with sensitivity and realism. Cultural and historical details, when included in the texts or illustrations, were found to be largely accurate and pertinent to the plotlines.

Headings:

Children's Literature – Evaluation

Content Analysis--Children's Literature

Japanese Americans

Minorities in literature

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Literature Review	4
Methodology	11
Results and Analysis	
Book Traits	15
Character Traits	18
Cultural Traits	25
Conclusion	28
Further Research	30
Appendices	
Appendix A - List of picture books analyzed	31
Appendix B - Character Analysis Instrument	32
References	33

INTRODUCTION

“Invisibility is dangerous to one’s self-esteem.
If the world is described and you are not in it, you feel lessened.”
(Lo and Lee, p.15)

Harriet Rohmer, founder of Children’s Book Press, recalls her realization in the 1970’s that racially diverse children “could not see images of themselves or other children from their neighborhoods in the books they were reading. I wondered, what kind of messages were those children getting about invisibility?” (Madigan, p.172). Current research shows that children’s conceptions about themselves and others begin very early, with children able “to observe and label certain kinds of differences among people by the age of three or four, [and] learn to categorize and stereotype by late childhood” (Harada, p.135).

As America becomes increasingly culturally diverse, most researchers agree that there is a need for a responsive increase in cultural diversity within children’s books. Ginny Moore-Kruse feels that “It is not only white children who are ill-equipped without diverse images; all children are ill-equipped if they have not had an opportunity to see themselves and others as valued beings” (Madigan, p.174). Professor Junko Yokota proposes that the best way to introduce children to the value of ‘the other’ is through fiction, where “cultural information can be present in virtually every aspect...[and] naturally and

truthfully woven into the story” (Yokota 1993, p.156). Zitlow and Stover (1998), in their article on “Japanese and Japanese American youth in literature,” agree, believing that young adults also benefit more from accurate cultural portrayals in fiction than nonfiction.

The purpose of this research is to examine children’s picture books about contemporary Japanese Americans, a cultural group that may not have been invisible in the past five decades of American children’s literature, but certainly has been hidden. This study will answer the question, How has the portrayal of Japanese Americans and Japanese American culture as presented in children’s picture books changed since the 1980’s? Additionally, how do the characters, values, and cultural details presented in recently published texts compare to the findings of the Council on Interracial Books for Children’s 1976 study of Asian American images in children’s literature? Characterization, setting, and cultural presentation will be examined through content analysis, and contrasted with the conclusions of the 1976 study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature that has helped to guide this study comes from two closely related research areas: studies of multicultural children's literature as a broad genre, and narrower studies of children's literature dealing specifically with Asian-Americans and Japanese-Americans.

Multicultural children's literature

Although *multicultural* is a term frequently used in research literature and popular media, its specific definition appears to vary widely. The chapter "Multicultural and international children's books" in *Children's Literature: Engaging Teachers and Children in Good Books* (Darigan, et al, 2002), states that the term *multicultural* is frequently misused to denote literature by or about ethnic groups in America as well as "literature from and about other cultural groups both within and beyond the United States" (Darigan, et al, p.293). The writers propose that *multiethnic* is the proper term to describe national literature, whereas *multicultural* is more appropriate when referring to world literature. In the works cited here, however, most authors have used multicultural to describe works by or about American ethnic groups.

In his article, "The politics of multicultural literature for children and adolescents: Combining perspectives and conversations" (Madigan, 1993), Dan Madigan presents three interviews with professionals who are "deeply involved with multicultural literature for children" (Madigan, p.168). The article discusses how political context affects the genre of multicultural literature, and provides each interviewee's understanding of the term. Ginny Moore-Kruse, director of the Cooperative Children's Book Center, defines multicultural literature simply "as being literature by and about people of color" (Madigan, p.169). Harriet Rohmer, founder of Children's Book Press, believes "multicultural literature is a literature of inclusion: stories from and stories about all our children" (Madigan, p.169). Elizabeth Martinez, an author, teacher, and a former reviewer for the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), discusses the need to use multicultural literature to combat "the main Eurocentric culture" in American education; she views multicultural literature as "a manner of recognizing different perspectives based on different historical experiences" (Madigan, p.171).

In other research, professor Junko Yokota (1993) broadens the definition of multicultural literature to include "literature that represents any distinct cultural group through accurate portrayal and rich detail" (Yokota 1993, p.157). Similarly, Karen Patricia Smith (Smith, 1993) believes that the definition of multiculturalism is changing from merely "not dominated by whites" to "any

persons whose lifestyle, enforced or otherwise, distinguishes them from the mainstream” (Smith, p.341).

Despite the variation in definition, there seems to be overall agreement about the uses of multicultural literature in child education. In his essay, “What exactly is multiculturalism?”, author and professor Shawn Wong discusses his lifelong interest in multicultural literature as having grown out of his own desire to understand his place as an Asian American writer within the U.S. literary canon. He feels that multicultural literature can help readers “truly understand the cultural transformation taking place in America’s identity and sense of self” (Wong, p.25). Similarly, in the article, “Issues in selecting multicultural children’s literature,” Junko Yokota believes that multicultural literature “provides [children with] vicarious experiences from cultures other than their own...influencing their decisions about how they will live in this culturally pluralistic world” (Yokota 1993, p.156).

Karen Patricia Smith, in her article, “The multicultural ethic and connections to literature for children and young adults” (Smith, 1993), identifies four main issues within multicultural children’s literature that confront educators and readers:

- 1) Exclusivity, or the concept that “professionals involved in the training of, or as providers of materials for young people...are responsible for

preparing young people to enter the world, not merely preparing them to exist within the environment in which they are currently being reared" (Smith, p.344).

- 2) The "insider" versus the "outsider" perspective in authorship of multicultural literature, and related questions of cultural validity. Junko Yokota also addresses this issue, believing that the resulting "difference in voice determines how readers will perceive the culture depicted" (Yokota 1993, p.158). The greatest problem with this has been the "predominance of Euro-American authors writing multicultural literature from an 'outside' point of view," which has often caused "a grouping together of certain different cultures as if they were one" (Yokota 1993, p.157), by using "an umbrella label such as 'Native American', 'Asian American,' or 'Hispanic American'" (Yokota 1993, p.158).
- 3) The problem of cultural stereotyping in available books, and the effect it can have on "children and youth who inhabit the impressionable world of those beginning to form their viewpoints and opinions of the people around them" (Smith, p.346). Children need to see characters, regardless of ethnic origin, acting as individuals who have distinct personalities.
- 4) The availability of multicultural resources. Smith believes that "if there is an increase in the number of offerings from multicultural authors and illustrators demonstrating the sensitivity needed to present the cultural

experience, the problems of inaccurate and inappropriate images as they are present[ed] in books for the young will become fewer” (Smith, p.347).

Availability is still a topic of great concern, as research shows that “books about or by African Americans make up about 2-3% of the American juvenile titles produced each year; the title production for Asian Americans, Latinos and Native Americans is even less.” (Darigan, et al, p.296). Yokota also discusses the rise in the number of books portraying a variety of American cultures in the sixties and seventies, but the subsequent decrease in publications during the eighties. He mentions that there is still a lack of “comparative research data on the representation of other [than African American] cultural groups in children’s books” (Yokota 1993, p.157). He concludes that “more contemporary situations need to be portrayed, allowing a look into the current life styles rather than overemphasizing historical heritage” (Yokota 1993, p.165).

Asian American and Japanese American children’s literature

The seminal work on Asian American children’s literature is the study “How children’s books distort the Asian American image,” published by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) in 1976. The Council had eleven book reviewers “find, read and analyze all children’s books on Asian American themes currently in print or in use in schools and libraries” (CIBC, p.3). The

reviewers found only 66 children's books published between 1945 and 1975 that met their criteria, 27 of which were by or about Japanese Americans. Using evaluative criteria developed with the Council, the review committee concluded that the majority of the books were "racist, sexist and elitist, and that the image of Asian Americans they present is grossly misleading" (CIBC, p.3). As a whole, the books tended to "misrepresent Asian American cultures...promote the myth of Asian Americans as a 'model minority'...[and] measure success by the extent to which Asian Americans have assimilated white middle-class values" (CIBC, p.3).

In the decades following this report, smaller studies and dissertations have examined Asian American images in children's literature, and many have concluded that although progress is being made, some stereotypes still persist and that "Asian American authors and characters continued to be under-represented" (Harada, p.137). Researchers and educators agree that many of the considerations in multicultural literature, such as authenticity, author viewpoint, and literary quality are also paramount in the evaluation of children's literature about Asian Americans (Aoki, 1981; Dowd, 1992; Pang et al, 1992; Harada, 1995).

The article, "Beyond chopsticks and dragons: Selecting Asian-American literature for children" (Pang, et al, 1992), cites demographic statistics showing that "Asian Americans are the fastest growing minority group in the United States" (Pang, et al, p.216), a phenomenon which may help account for the surge in the number of Asian American children's books published in the 1990's

compared to the previous two decades. The authors mention the need for books reflecting Asian American children in everyday, contemporary settings as well as folklore and history, since many “Asian Americans are American citizens who may represent fifth-generation, native-born Americans, not new immigrants” (Pang, et al, p.219).

Junko Yokota also mentions that “it is still difficult to find a contemporary story about Japanese Americans”, and because of this “many school and public libraries still have on their shelves numerous books that are no longer appropriate because they contain outdated images, incorrect information, or unfortunate attitudes of earlier generations” (Yokota 1999, p.47).

The common thread in all of these articles is that the currently available children’s books depicting Japanese Americans, and on a larger scale other multicultural groups, should accurately and realistically reflect both events in the past and the current culture.

METHODOLOGY

Book selection

Amassing the seventeen books included in the sample (see Appendix A) was more challenging than originally expected. The initial parameters were to include picture books that portrayed Japanese Americans, and that were published in the United States between the years 1980 and 2000. An examination of the reference sources *A to Zoo*, *Children's Books in Print*, and *Children's Choice*, created a short list of titles containing characters who were identified as "Ethnic groups in the U.S. - Japanese Americans." A search of online bibliographies of picture books about Japanese Americans (including the Internet School Library Media Center site from James Madison University, the Children's Literature Web Guide, and countless others), reconfirmed the titles already found and uncovered additional titles within the appropriate publication range. A total of twenty titles formed the initial booklist.

The greater difficulty lay in obtaining some of the books for analysis. Many (13) were available at local libraries or through inter-library loan, but seven of the titles were not carried. Although this researcher attempted to purchase all of the non-library titles, she could only acquire four of them, even

with the help of online used book dealers. Therefore three of the original twenty titles had to be stricken from the list, which was detrimental to the sample size.

Content Analysis

Since this study sought to examine both textual and pictorial information in picture books, content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate research method. Content analysis is “the study of recorded human communications” (Babbie, p. 304), and can be used to identify both the manifest (surface) and latent (contextual) information in written, oral, or visual material. To help ensure consistent standards for the interpretation of information, coding instruments are created; these generally consist of study-specific categories that are used to isolate the occurrence of measurable variables (Babbie, p.309). Even with clearly defined coding variables, a flaw of content analysis is that the results can still be somewhat subjective. In an effort to increase the validity of the coding, three of the books in the sample were coded independently by a second coder, and the results compared to those of the primary researcher. Coding consistency was high, with minor discrepancies only in the “plus/minus position” section of one of the coding instruments.

This study utilized two previously tested coding instruments, one that specifically isolated character traits of main characters, and one that more generally addressed the depiction of cultural details in children’s literature.

Liu's Character Analysis Instrument

In her 1998 dissertation, "Images of Chinese people, Chinese-Americans, and Chinese culture in children's and adolescents' fiction (1980-1997)," Li Liu coded children's picture and chapter books using a 'Character Analysis Instrument' that isolates categories based partially on research by Bernard Berelson (Liu, 1998). The instrument codes for bibliographic information, and a wide range of character traits, including: physical description, socioeconomic status, attitudes, goals, plus/minus position in the story, and biological or racial identity. Berelson explains the "plus / minus" position as "the treatment of the subject matter... is the communication for or against the particular subject" (Berelson, p. 150). This instrument was adopted for this study (see Appendix B), with only slight modifications to eliminate criteria relevant specifically to Chinese American characters.

Yokota's Criteria for Evaluation of Cultural Portrayal

Although the Asian American Children's Book Project set forth an exhaustive list of criteria that can be used to analyze books portraying Asian Americans, many of the questions demanded a distinctly insider perspective that this researcher lacks. Therefore, the cultural information portrayed in the picture books was assessed using Junko Yokota's more general criteria for selecting

appropriate multicultural literature as defined in his 1993 article. The books were analyzed for:

- Richness in cultural details - “details from the culture enhance the story in such a way that readers gain a sense of the culture they are reading about” (Yokota 1993, p.160).
- Authentic dialogue and relationships.
- In-depth treatment of cultural issues.
- Inclusion of members of a ‘minority’ group for a purpose - “characters are to be regarded as distinct individuals whose lives are rooted in their culture, no matter how minor their role in the story, avoiding the practice of including minorities to fulfill a ‘quota’ of sorts” (Yokota 1993, p.160).

Beyond counting the instances of cultural accuracy, however, Yokota reminds readers of his belief that “evaluation of the piece must include the criteria for good literature, as well as the criteria for cultural consciousness” (Yokota 1993, p.158). Readers should critique all books for their literary value as well as their multicultural utility.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Using Li Liu's Character Analysis Instrument (Appendix B) and Junko Yokota's criteria for culturally accurate multicultural literature, the seventeen books in the sample have been coded and examined. The results have been grouped into three major sections: Book Traits (bibliographic data), Character Traits, and Cultural Traits. For ease of analysis, the larger sections have been further subdivided into subsections that correspond with the coding categories used.

Book Traits

Authorship

The seventeen books examined represent the work of twelve different authors. Four of the authors both wrote and illustrated their nine respective works; books by Allen Say account for six of these, or a substantial 67%. Say is also the only author with multiple titles in the sample, accounting for 37% of the total books analyzed. The remaining eight books had separate authors and illustrators. Publication information indicates that of the twelve authors or author/illustrators, seven are Asian American or Japanese American.

Publication year

Only three of the books found for this sample were published in the 1980's. The remaining fourteen were published between 1990 and 1999, often with more than one title published in each year starting at 1993. The disparity in the number of books for the two decades seems to correspond to the trend in multicultural book publishing mentioned by Junko Yokota (1993); the comparative wealth of books about Japanese Americans in the 1990's may be an attempt to compensate for the scarcity of those published in the 1980's.

Subject Headings

Although it does not seem to be a requirement for inclusion on children's booklists of Japanese American picture books, the majority of the books, approximately 76% (13 titles), included subject headings that indicated cultural identity; four titles had generic subject headings. Only one title, *Grandfather's Journey*, contained two culturally identifiable headings; both were recorded. The table below shows the occurrence of the different culturally specific headings.

Subject heading	Number of titles	Percent of total
Japanese Americans - Fiction	8	47%
Japan - Fiction	3	18%
Japanese Americans - Evacuation and Relocation, 1942-1945 - Fiction	2	12%
Asian Americans - Fiction	1	6%
[Other / Generic]	4	24%

Targeted Audience Age

None of the books in this sample included publication information about the targeted audience age, and booklists that provided age ranges next to these titles were often inconsistent. However, the majority of these books are intended for grade-school children, approximately aged six to twelve. Only one, Narahashi's *I Have a Friend*, is obviously aimed at preschoolers. Many of the others, particularly the historical fiction titles, may also be appropriate for sharing with young adults.

Genre

Six of the books were set in the past and are considered works of historical fiction – three of these dealt with Japanese relocation camps in the 1940's, two spanned the decades preceding WWII, and one occurs approximately during the 1960's or 70's.

Of the eleven books with unspecified contemporary or “present” settings, nine are works of realistic fiction, while the remaining two are fantasies. It is interesting to note that both of the fantasies, *A River Dream* and *Stranger in the Mirror*, are by Allen Say.

Setting

The vast majority of the books, 82% (14), are set primarily in America. Most of these occur in unspecified suburban “home” locations; two are

specifically set in cities, one of which is New York. Only one story, Allen Say's *Grandfather's Journey*, portrays travel throughout the United States and between the U.S. and Japan. Of the two remaining books, both are set in Japan, one in Yokohama and one in Osaka.

Character Traits

Physical Traits

For each text, only one primary or main character was identified and analyzed for physical traits such as age, sex, and general appearance. The vast majority (82%) of the main characters in these books were children, ranging in age from approximately four to ten. Only 18%, or three, of the books were about adult main characters. In one of the books, Kroll's *Pink Paper Swans*, the main character is an African American child who befriends an adult Japanese American neighbor. Since the neighbor was truly a secondary character, only the child's character was analyzed, focusing on her relationship with the neighbor. Of the seventeen characters, eleven (65%) were female, and six (35%) were male.

Physically, almost all of the Japanese or Japanese American characters (both main and supporting) pictured in the books have straight brown or black hair and oval eyes. The two notable exceptions occur in Wells' *Yoko*, in which all of the characters are anthropomorphic animals, and Igus' *Two Mrs. Gibsons*, where the main character Toyomi has both African American and Japanese American heritage. The characters are depicted as individuals with a variety of

appearances and features, and are not generic characters or stereotypes. Three of the books (including *Yoko*) are illustrated in a somewhat impressionistic style; the majority had very realistic illustrations.

Status

A character's occupation, social status and economic status can be somewhat difficult to determine in picture books, as the text is often less descriptive than in chapter books. Pictorial clues may be found, but differences in illustration styles can pose problems for consistency in interpretation. Since most of the main characters are children, they are not considered to have occupations other than being grade school students. The socioeconomic status of the majority of the characters seemed to be middle-class. Fifteen of the books depicted clean and/or pleasantly decorated suburban or urban homes. It is important to note that in the three books depicting the World War II Relocation Camps, the characters were made to leave their middle-class surroundings and forced to live in extreme poverty; the books use the images of the comfortable homes that are left to underscore the squalor of the prison camps and the cruelty of that period in American history. In two of the books, socioeconomic status is too difficult to determine.

Attitudes

The actions of each main character were examined to determine his/her attitude toward family, other members of his/her ethnic group, peers, and authority figures. In many of the texts, relationships only occurred for one or two categories; in only two instances were all four relationships addressed, and indeed in one book, Narahashi's *I Have a Friend*, the main character does not interact with anyone but his shadow. However, of the sixteen characters who do have interactions with other humans, all of them interact with family, and some with additional characters. The table below shows that when interactions do occur in the books, they are more often positive than negative.

Attitudes toward:	Positive		Negative		Not Specified	
	# of titles	% of total	# of titles	% of total	# of titles	% of total
Family	13	76%	3	18%	1	6%
Peers	6	35%	3	18%	8	47%
Authority figures	5	29%	3	18%	9	53%
Members of own ethnic group	4	23%	2	12%	11	65%

Family members are overwhelmingly treated with love and respect; even in the three books where the main characters express negative feelings toward their families, they are temporary feelings of rebellion or embarrassment rather than permanent hostility. In Johnston's *Fishing Sunday*, the young Japanese American boy is initially embarrassed by the appearance and mannerisms of his

Japanese grandfather, and projects his cultural insecurity onto the actions of the other fishermen on the boat. By the end of the story, however, he begins to value both his grandfather's fishing expertise and cultural heritage. Likewise, in Say's *Allison*, Allison feels disconnected from her Caucasian parents when she discovers she is adopted; when her parents let her "adopt" a stray cat, she realizes that love is not dependent on biology, and harmony is restored. The last instance of negative attitudes toward family occurs in Say's *Tea with Milk*, when Masako defies her parents' attempt to marry her to a banker, and instead gets a job in town. Her defiance is culturally oriented – she wants the same independence that she feels women have in American culture, and feels that the more traditional attitudes in the small Japanese village where her parents live do not suit her.

Instances in which the main characters interact with members of their own ethnic groups or peers are less common, but are also more often positive than negative. Again, the two instances of negative attitudes toward members of one's own ethnic group occur in *Fishing Sunday* and *Tea with Milk*, and both are resolved positively. Interestingly, the only three books in which the main characters have negative attitudes toward authority figures are those that deal with the internment camps created during WWII, when the U.S. government denied the rights of and unjustly imprisoned tens of thousands of Japanese Americans. In *The Bracelet*, *So Far from the Sea*, and *Baseball Saved Us*, characters express feelings of anger against the government policies and a sense of injustice

at their situation; the armed prison guards are seen as the physical embodiment of government oppression.

Goals

Character goals were divided into five basic categories: Self Realization or Independence, Cultural Acceptance (either seeking acceptance of the dominant culture or one's own culture), Achievement or Success, Social or Economic Advancement, and Other goals. If a main character pursued more than one goal in the story, both were recorded.

Character Goals		Occurrence in books	Percent of total number of titles
Self Realization / Independence		14	82%
Acceptance	Dominant Culture	6	35%
	Own Culture	4	24%
Achievement / Success		4	24%
Social / Economic Advancement		1	6%
Other		4	24%

As the above table shows, the majority of characters were seeking self realization or independence. This goal is one that child readers relate to well, and since all of the books sampled are picture books, which are intended for a younger audience, its predominance is not surprising. The remaining goals were more evenly spread, with the understandable exception of Social / Economic Advancement, which may not be particularly important to child readers, and therefore is not reflected in the characters written for them.

Plus/Minus Position

According to Liu, the “plus/minus position” is a way to categorize “a character’s positive or negative stature in the book” (Liu, p. 61). Five opposing subcategories are presented; for this study, each main character was determined to be on the positive or negative side of each subcategory for the majority of the book. For example, in the story *Yoko*, the character Yoko is a young Japanese American child whose classmates tease her for eating sushi at snacktime. Yoko’s position in the story can be characterized in the following manner: her cultural difference generates disapproval from her classmates; her predicament is portrayed sympathetically in the text; being teased is undesirable; she maintains a positive attitude toward herself (liking); and the overall tone of both the story and illustrations is one of pleasantness.

Position	Number of main characters	Percent of total (for each pair)
Approval	12	71%
Disapproval	5	29%
Sympathy	16	94%
Hostility	1	6%
Desirability	10	59%
Undesirability	7	41%
Liking	14	82%
Disliking	3	18%
Pleasantness	11	65%
Unpleasantness	6	35%

The results show that the majority of characters are in positive positions in the books sampled. The characters largely behave in a way that the reader can

sympathize with, even when their actions may not be emulative, as with the boy's embarrassment in *Fishing Sunday*, or Sachiko's initial reluctance to spend time with her senile grandmother in *Sachiko Means Happiness*.

Character Identity

In most cases, the main character's racial or biological identity was easy to determine. Two of the main characters (both adults) are Japanese, and Janetta in *Pink Paper Swans* is African American. Ten of the seventeen main characters are explicitly identified in the texts as being Japanese American; in four of the books, the main characters are clearly Asian American, but a more specific racial identity is not given. Possibly because each of the books has a Japanese American author (three titles are by Allen Say, one by Keiko Narahashi), they have been included by proxy on some of the booklists of picture books portraying Japanese American children that were used to create this sample.

These four texts, however, create an important and arguably positive subgroup in the currently available picture books portraying Japanese American children. The main characters in *Emma's Rug*, *I Have a Friend*, *A River Dream*, and *Stranger in the Mirror*, are physically depicted as Japanese American, but the situations they are in could occur for any child, regardless of race. Although this could be criticized as simply an instance of "fulfill[ing] a quota" of minority characters in children's literature (Yokota 1993, p.160), it could also be recognized as a positive step in multicultural representation – here the authors

have chosen to represent the classic “everychild” character as Japanese American instead of Caucasian.

Cultural Traits

The portrayal of Japanese American culture was evaluated according to Yokota’s criteria for selecting multicultural literature. Both the text and illustrations of each book were examined for richness of cultural details, authentic dialogue and relationships, in-depth treatment of cultural issues, and purposeful inclusion of minority characters (Yokota 1993, p.160). The analysis of this aspect of the books’ content proved more difficult to quantify; however, of the texts that did include specifically Japanese or Japanese American cultural information (76%), the majority did so in a realistic and positive way.

Each of the three texts portraying the WWII internment camp experience succeeded in meeting all four of the criteria for cultural accuracy and richness. The details about life within the prisons were vividly and substantially presented in both the text and illustrations, and the dialogue and relationships between the characters were realistic. In each of these three texts, and indeed in all of the books except *Pink Paper Swans*, the Japanese Americans portrayed are the main or primary characters in the story, and there did not appear to be any evidence of tokenism.

Thirteen of the seventeen books included cultural details, but the level of “richness” varied. Specific cultural items appeared in 65% (11) of the texts; five of the picture books portrayed the wearing of kimonos by men or women, three involved origami making, two included Japanese orthography, and five books included some aspect of Japanese cuisine as a part of the story. When such details did appear, they were presented in the illustrations with a high degree of pictorial accuracy. Illustrations depicting the use of *hashi*, or chopsticks, for eating or cooking showed utensils that were appropriately tapered, and not of uniform width. All kimonos shown were worn with the right side folded under the left, and were mainly depicted as formal apparel. The exception to this is *Yoko*, where the mother character is shown wearing a kimono everyday; this does seem to be a gratuitous detail, but may be an attempt to give a recognizable cultural identity to an anthropomorphic cat. Also in *Grandfather’s Journey* and *Tea with Milk*, some of the Japanese characters are shown in traditional dress, which is appropriate and accurate given the historical context of these stories. The CIBC reviewers had criticized the “promotion of the image that all Japanese Americans wear kimonos and zoris all day” (CIBC, p. 16) in the pre-1970 books as culturally inaccurate and a reinforcement of stereotypes.

Three of the texts did not contain conversation between characters, but of those that did include substantial dialogue, the majority did so realistically. Characters discussed, argued, and teased with each other in ways that were very true to life. Only two of the female characters were described as always speaking

quietly and softly, one of the stereotypes of Asian women that the CIBC study identified. The majority of female characters, both children and adult, were portrayed as independent, creative, and assertive, with a wide variety of interests and goals.

For 41% (7) of the books analyzed, cultural issues were of primary concern in the story. These included five of the six historical genre texts, *Yoko*, and *Fishing Sunday*. In many of the other books the paramount issues were not culturally specific, but addressed universal topics such as adoption, Alzheimer's disease, or personal relationships. The cultural details present in these stories helped to enhance the reader's understanding of the characters, but were not themselves the focus of the story.

Based on Yokota's criteria for evaluating multicultural literature, the picture books portraying Japanese Americans that are currently available are largely of a high quality. Cultural accuracy is good, characterization is multidimensional and purposeful, and the range of topics addressed is fairly broad for such a small sample size. It appears that the authors and illustrators responsible for these works are either drawing from their own experiences or have done more research on the culture they are portraying than did the authors in the past, and are thereby able to create books that are culturally accurate and realistic. The harmful stereotypes that dominated the books examined in the CIBC study no longer appear to be present in the current literature.

CONCLUSION

In today's society, conventional wisdom holds that communities tend to celebrate the variety of cultures that comprise "American culture" rather than denigrate them, but researchers feel that reinforcement of this trend is needed, particularly in literature for children. Because children learn to label differences in others at a young age (Harada, 1995), they benefit from books that portray characters of diverse ethnic heritage accurately and without harmful stereotypes. Multicultural literature is a powerful tool that is used increasingly in schools to help children understand and appreciate human diversity. Although the number of titles depicting Japanese Americans has increased in the past decade, there is still a disproportionately small number of these books published compared to the percentage of American children with Japanese heritage.

The 1976 study by the Council on Interracial Books for Children, the Asian American Children's Book Project, found that the vast majority of children's books available at that time depicting Asian Americans (including Japanese Americans) were replete with negative stereotypes and highly offensive. Asian American characters were often one-dimensional and peripheral, and cultural details were inaccurately presented. Because the results of the CIBC study were so damning, it could be assumed that books depicting Asian Americans

published after 1976 would be more culturally accurate. Publication reference guides show that there were very few children's picture books with Japanese American characters published in the 1980's, but that the 1990's saw at least a five-fold increase in titles available.

The findings of this study, a content analysis of the picture books published after 1980 that depict Japanese Americans, show that the stereotypes denounced by the CIBC no longer seem to be perpetuated, at least not in this sample of texts. The difference in the images presented by the two samples is striking, which may simply be the result of the changing mores of society, but also may be an effect of the CIBC's research. Many of the books analyzed in this study portray Japanese American characters examining their feelings about their culture and place in society; the majority of these characters are multi-dimensional and are portrayed with sensitivity and realism. Cultural and historical details, when included in the texts or illustrations, were found to be largely accurate and pertinent to the plotlines. Although there does seem to be a marked increase in the number of children's picture books portraying Japanese Americans published recently, lack of availability and access to the books is still an issue of concern.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this research would be enhanced by an expansion of both the sample parameters and the analytical criteria. The sample could be broadened to include all relevant fictional picture books published from the 1940's to the present, which could also be compared to an analysis of the relevant nonfiction works of each decade. Such an expansion would provide a more comprehensive historical and genre perspective than was possible in this study. An examination of the literature available for older children and young adults would allow a comparison of the type and availability of information across a wider age range. And for each of these expanded samples, additional analysis of the texts using the more extensive analytical criteria developed by the 1976 CIBC study would provide a greater depth of inquiry into the cultural information being presented.

This study, with its limited sample size and generalized cultural analysis instrument, has examined only a small portion of the literature in this subject area. Although additional research is needed to further address the changing portrayal of Japanese Americans in children's books, the findings thus far are encouraging.

APPENDIX A:LIST OF BOOKS ANALYZED1980's

- 1984 Friedman, Ina How My Parents Learned to Eat
- 1987 Narahashi, Keiko I Have a Friend
- 1988 Say, Allen A River Dream

1990's

- 1990 Sakai, Kimiko Sachiko Means Happiness
- 1993 Say, Allen Grandfather's Journey
- 1993 Uchida, Yoshiko The Bracelet
- 1993 Mochizuki, Ken Baseball Saved Us
- 1994 Igus, Toyomi Two Mrs. Gibsons
- 1994 Kroll, Virginia Pink Paper Swans
- 1995 Hamanaka, Sheila Bebop-a-do-walk
- 1995 Say, Allen Stranger in the Mirror
- 1996 Say, Allen Emma's Rug
- 1996 Johnston, Tony Fishing Sunday
- 1997 Say, Allen Allison
- 1998 Bunting, Eve So Far from the Sea
- 1998 Wells, Rosemary Yoko
- 1999 Say, Allen Tea with Milk

APPENDIX B
Character Analysis Instrument (abridged from Liu, 1998)

Author/Illustrator _____

Bibliographic Information

Book Title _____

Publisher _____

Publication Year _____

Subject Headings _____

Targeted Audience Age _____

Setting Place _____

Setting Time _____

Literary Genre _____

Main/Major Character _____

1. Physical Traits

Age _____

Sex _____

Description _____

2. Status

Occupation _____

Socio-Economic _____

3. Attitudes toward:

Family _____

Members of his/her ethnic group _____

Peers _____

Authority figures _____

4. Goals

Self/Realization/Independence _____

Social/Economic Advancement _____

Acceptance (Dominant culture/Own culture) _____

Achievement/Success _____

Other _____

5. Plus/Minus position

Approval/Disapproval _____

Sympathy/Hostility _____

Desirability/Undesirability _____

Liking/Disliking _____

Pleasantness/Unpleasantness _____

6. Character's Identity

Biological and Racial Identity _____

Social/Cultural Identity _____

7. Additional Personality Traits _____

Evaluative Category:

1. Stereotypic/Unauthentic Textual Information _____

2. Inaccurate/Stereotypic Pictorial Information _____

REFERENCES

- Aoki, Elaine M. 1981. "'Are you Chinese? Are you Japanese? Are you just a mixed-up kid?' Using Asian American children's literature." *Reading Teacher*, 34 (4) : 382-5.
- Babbie, Earl R. 2001. *The practice of social research, 9th edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Berelson, Bernard. 1971. *Content Analysis in Communication Research*. New York: Hafner Publishing Co.
- Council on Interracial Books for Children. 1976. "How children's books distort the Asian American Image." *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 7 (2 & 3) : 3-17.
- Darigan, Daniel L., et al. 2002. "Multicultural and international children's books." In *Children's literature: Engaging teachers and children in good books*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice.
- Dowd, Frances Smardo. 1992. "We're not in Kansas anymore: Evaluating children's books portraying Native American and Asian cultures." *Childhood Education*, 68 (4) : 219-24.
- Harada, Violet H. 1995. "Issues of ethnicity, authenticity, and quality in Asian-American picture books, 1983-93." *JOYS*, 8 (2) : 135-49.
- Liu, Li. 1998. Images of Chinese people, Chinese-Americans, and Chinese culture in children's and adolescents' fiction (1980-1997). Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts at Amherst.
- Lo, Suzanne, and Ginny Lee. 1993. "Asian images in picture books: What stories do we tell our children?" *Emergency Librarian*, 20 (5) : 14-18.
- Madigan, Dan. 1993. "The politics of multicultural literature for children and adolescents: Combining perspectives and conversations." *Language Arts*, 70 (3) : 168-76.

- Pang, Valerie Ooka, et al. 1992. "Beyond chopsticks and dragons: Selecting Asian-American literature for children." *Reading Teacher*, 46 (3) : 216-224.
- Smith, Karen Patricia. 1993. "The multicultural ethic and connections to literature for children and young adults." *Library Trends*, 41 (3) : 341-53.
- Wong, Shawn. 1993. "What exactly is multiculturalism?" *Emergency Librarian*, 20 (5) : 25-27.
- Yokota, Junko. 1993. "Issues in selecting multicultural children's literature." *Language Arts*, 70 (3) : 156-67.
- Yokota, Junko. 1999. "Japanese and Japanese-Americans: Portrayals in recent children's books." *Book Links*, 8 (3) : 47-53.
- Zitlow, Connie S., and Lois Stover. 1998. "Japanese and Japanese American youth in literature." *ALAN Review*, 25 (3) : 7-17.