

“Is Pokémon Japanese?": Fifth Graders' Intercultural Learning through Japanese Pictorial Texts

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Working together in a fifth grade classroom at Cañon Elementary School in central Arizona, Junko, a university researcher from the University of Arizona, and Trinkka, a fifth grade teacher, wanted to explore intercultural understanding. Japanese pictorial texts, including *manga*, *anime*, *kamishibai* (Japanese traditional visual storytelling), and picture books were introduced in Trinkka's classroom while incorporating cultural aspects of Junko's native country, Japan, to fifth grade students. Trinkka, having known Junko previously, was excited to have her provide students with this opportunity. Over a six-month period, Junko visited the class twice a week, giving students opportunities to explore both modern and historical Japan using Japanese pictorial texts.

Context and Curriculum

Cañon Elementary School is a small K-8 public school located in Black Canyon City, Arizona, approximately 50 miles north of the Phoenix metropolitan area. Student demographic information for the school consists of 86% of Caucasian and 14% of Latino, American Indian, African American, and Asian American. Around 60% of the students are eligible for free lunches. The participants included 12 fifth graders: four females and eight males. Nine of them were Caucasian and three of them were Latino, African American, and Native American. Most of these students had not traveled far beyond their remote community of Black Canyon City.

The fifth graders learned about Japan within a curriculum involving a curriculum as inquiry framework (Short, 2009; Short, Harste & Burke, 1996), intertextuality (Short, 1992, 1993), and a curriculum that is international (Short, 2008). In the first phase of enacting the curriculum, the students explored 53 picture books regarding Japan; 22 books came from *Worlds of Words' Japanese Culture and Language Book Kits*, and 31 books were chosen from the WorldCat library search engine. Many books portrayed cultural and historical facts and details that were unfamiliar to students; therefore, Junko located the books based on universal themes, which would open up the accessibility of the books to students. Themes included: (1) War and Peace, (2) Land and Ecology, (3) Cities and Villages, (4) People, (5) Family and Friends, and (6) Animals. Text sets were constructed around each theme (see Table 1).

Table 1: Picture book text-sets.

Groups	Fiction	Non-fiction
		• <i>Pearl Harbor Child</i>
		• <u>Sadako</u> *
	• <u>Barefoot Gen</u> *	

1	War & Peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseball Saved Us • The Unbreakable Code 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shin's Tricycle • Hiroshima and Nagasaki • Hiroshima • Atom Bomb
2	Land & Ecology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My First Japanese Kanji Book * • The Ainu and the Fox * • The Wakame Gatherers • <i>How My Parents Learned to Eat</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiromi's Hands • <i>Cooking the Japanese Way</i> • A Taste of Japan • <i>Food and Recipes of Japan</i> • <i>A World of Recipes: Japan</i> • <i>Sushi for Kids</i>
3	Cities & Villages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grandpa's Town * • Kamishibai Man * • The Park Bench * • I Lost My Dad * • Erika-san • <i>Tokyo Friends</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>New Asian Home</i> • <i>Dropping in on Japan</i> • <i>Peoples of the World</i>
4	People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cook Melons Turn to Frogs!: The Life and Poems of Issa * • The Ainu: A Story of Japan's Original People * • My Japan * • <i>Tea with Milk</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>In Search of the Spirits: The Living National Treasures of Japan</i> * • Honda * • <i>Japan (World in View)</i> • <i>Cities of the World</i> • <i>Tokyo</i>
5	Family & Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Way We Do It in Japan • Grandfather's Journey • <i>Suki's Kimono</i> • The Moon Princess * • The Boy of the Three-Year Nap * 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Countries of the World: Japan</i> • <i>Southern and Eastern Asia</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Allison •<u>The Origami Master</u>* •<u>Ho-LimLim</u>* •<u>The Adventure of Momotaro</u>* 	
6 Animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<u>The Animals: Selected Poems</u>* •<u>Guri and Gura</u>* •<u>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</u>* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<u>Hachiko</u>* •Japan

Note. * shows the books are from Japanese culture and language book kits, provided by *Worlds of Words* at the University of Arizona. Retrieved from <http://wowlit.org/links/booklists/japanese-language-and-culture-kit-book-list/>

In the second phase of the curriculum, students explored Japan using Japanese pictorial texts including manga, anime, and kamishibai along with picture books and various Internet resources about Japan. For manga, a comic book originally published in Japan and translated into English, they read *Yotsuba&!, Volume 1* (Azuma, 2009), a contemporary realistic fictional text about a five-year-old girl's everyday life with her adoptive father and neighbors, set in an urban city in Japan. For anime, animation originating in Japan, students watched *Ponyo* (Miyazaki & Suzuki, 2010), a modern fantasy about a relationship between a female goldfish and a young boy, set in a seaside village in Japan. For kamishibai, a traditional Japanese form of visual storytelling, students watched *Hats for the Jizos* (Matsutani, Matsuyama & Tamaki, 2002), a Japanese folktale about an old couple and statues of Jizo, set in a village in Japan. One kamishibai story typically consists of 12 to 16 sturdy panels. Illustrations are printed on the front of the panel, and on the back of it is the text to be read. A kamishibai audience looks only at the illustrations while a storyteller reads the texts.



Intercultural Learning

In the beginning, we saw that students were more apt to notice how different their culture was from Japan's culture. Many things were odd to the students, although they were intrigued by these cultural differences. The more they learned about Japan, the more students gained awareness not only of how different the cultures were, but also of how similar they were when it came to the people themselves. Junko conducted an in-depth analysis of students' learning by questioning what understandings of Japanese culture were demonstrated in students' responses to the texts.

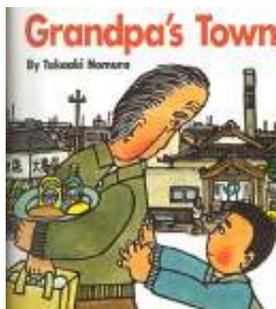
The fifth graders showed four types of responses, including (1) ethnocentrism; (2) understanding and acceptance; (3) respect, appreciation, and valuing; and (4) change. The categories were adapted from Fennes and Hapgood's (1997) "continuum of intercultural learning" model (see Figure 1), after analyzing students' responses in relation to this continuum. It is important to note that Fennes and Hapgood argued that intercultural learning is a continuous and recursive process.



Figure 1: Continuum of intercultural learning (Fennes and Hapgood, 1997, p. 48).

Ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism differentiates the world into two parts, *us* and *them* (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997). At the beginning of the study, students often tended to make judgments about Japanese culture based on their own cultures. For example, many of them resisted [*Grandpa's Town*](#) (Nomura & Stinchecum, 1991), a picture book about the relationship between a grandfather and his grandson set in Japan. When students saw the images of naked people taking a bath together at a public bath, they screamed, "It's *disgusting!*" and, "It's *strange!*" The following conversation illuminates Nicole and Greg's perspectives of the Japanese bath culture:



Nicole: Do you guys [Japanese people] wear bathing suits [at public bath]? I am just wondering because one of the books [*Grandpa's Town*] that you brought ... it has them like the ... everyone is bathing all the together.

Trinka (Teacher): It's different from us.

Junko: It's culture. When we take a bath, women and men take a bath separately

Nicole: That's weird . . . Because we take a shower by ourselves.

Trinka (Teacher): But ... small kids take baths with their parents.

Greg: No [shaking his head], ...I never take a bath with my parents....

Nicole used the word *weird* to express her difficulty in understanding the Japanese bathing culture. Greg also showed resistance to it as an unacceptable practice. We attempted to provide different perspectives, moving from evaluating an unfamiliar cultural practice based on the students' own cultural experiences to understanding and accepting the unfamiliar practice. However, students did not move beyond the stance of resistance.

Understanding and acceptance.

The more knowledge students gained about Japanese culture and people, the more they became aware of cultural similarities as well as differences, leading them to develop an understanding and acceptance of Japanese culture. Cultural x-rays (Short, 2008; see Figure 2), were used to support students' exploration of their own cultural identities, such as holiday activities. We found that learning about holidays in Japan and in the U.S. enhanced the students' cross-cultural awareness. In a holiday activity, for example, students explored Japanese holidays using the two picture books, *I Live in Tokyo* (Takabayashi, 2001) and *Japanese Celebrations: Cherry Blossoms, Lanterns and Stars!* (Reynolds, 2006). During the read-aloud of the books, students were invited to bring up questions, wonderings, or connections related with the stories or their experiences by asking questions such as "What do you notice?" and "Does this remind you of anything you have done before?" They identified different holidays and holiday activities in Japan, and compared them to those in the United States. After the read-aloud sessions, they were encouraged to consider cross-cultural commonalities between Japanese and American holidays in the following activity:

- Students in pairs were provided 10 cards having the names of Japanese holidays and 14 cards having the names of American holidays;
- The student pairs sorted out the cards according to connections, themes, and patterns, not by country or holiday (see Figure 3);
- After the student pairs finished sorting, they shared connections they found, using the comparison chart (see Figure 4).

This sorting activity encouraged students to identify both different and similar holiday and social activities in Japan and in the United States. For example, they identified activities such as cleaning

Respect, appreciation, and valuing.

Fennes and Hapgood (1997) argued that people respect, appreciate, and value culture when they develop an understanding of cultural diversity and complexity. These fifth graders began to demonstrate positive attitudes for Japanese culture as they gained an understanding of the diversity and complexity within Japanese culture, through learning about cultural values and beliefs, language, and social and historical issues. In the example below, Michael recognized Ponyo's mother playing two roles, a mother and a sea god, in anime *Ponyo*:

Junko: Who is Ponyo's mom?

Bianca: She is beautiful and pretty.

Michael: She is a sea god?

Junko: Yes, she is. How do you know that?

Michael: Because the guys [shipmen] when they saw her [Ponyo's mother], the guys did this [putting his palms together in front of his chest and bowing].

Michael supported his identification of Ponyo's mother as a sea god based on his own observations of the characters' religious gestures in Figure 5. This awareness encouraged Michael and other students to discuss and learn about the roles of the sea and the sea god in Japan; the ocean is regarded as a sacred place, always connected to *mother* because Japanese people believe that the ocean is *the mother* who gives birth, since all life is thought to have begun there.



Figure 5: Sailors bowing to a sea god presented in *Ponyo*.

Students also learned about Japanese cultural values and beliefs through the kamishibai story, *Hats for the Jizos*. The Jizo statue, a religious figure of Japanese Buddhism, is depicted as an important character in the story. As shown in this conversation, making a connection between the Jizo statue and the U.S. Statue of Liberty, and identifying a statue as a symbolical link between both countries helped raise students' awareness that the Japanese people believe in the spiritual value of the Jizo statue:

Nicole: The Statue of Liberty is in New York and the statues of *Jizos* are in Japan.

Greg: Both are statues....

Michael: People present there and they look up to them [the *Jizo* and the Statue of Liberty].

Change.

Change refers to the development of new attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997). As the students developed an understanding of, and started to accept and value, Japanese culture, they began to actively show great curiosity about Japan. Many students started to make connections between Japan and the United States using “kid culture” (Short & Kaser, 1998) as “significant cultural domains” (Sung, Kim, & O’Herron, 2014). For example, on the last day of this study, when students were encouraged to sketch or write about the most significant thing that they learned throughout the Japan inquiry, Sam and Jerry engaged in drawing *Pokémon* (see Figure 6, Shudo & Tanaka, 1998) as an important popular cultural icon among both Japanese and American children, serving as a cultural bridge between Japanese and American cultures.

Greg and Peter expressed their significant connections in Figure 7. When Greg was asked why he was drawing an airplane, he said, “People in Nagasaki are asking for help when the bomb is dropping from the plane.” Similar to Greg, Peter’s focus was on drawing a train that people were taking in order to escape from the bomb. Greg and Peter were the two students who extensively explored the text set regarding War and Peace, including *Shin’s Tricycle* (Kodama & Ando, 1995) and *Sadako* (Coerr, 1993). These stories seemed to affect the two students on a deeper level, and helped them develop emotional connections and a sense of caring because they had to imagine themselves in the situations depicted.



Figure 6: Graffiti board by Jerry and Sam.

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Nudging Young Adults' Readings of Gendered and Cultured Texts: What is the Role of the Adult in a Reader Centered Space?

Marie LeJeune

What is a teacher's role in navigating problematic issues of sexism, gender bias, or abuse of children and marginalized people within a society as they are discussed in a text for children? How might teachers or adults facilitate critical and thoughtful discussions of damaging practices while not reducing a culture, country, or group of people? Although critical literacy and other culturally responsive pedagogies call for opening up classroom spaces to examinations of different ways of being in the world, often this necessitates a delicate juggling act for readers and teachers (Simpson, 1996; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Short, 2009).

These were the professional tensions I struggled to resolve when I spent two weeks reading Patricia McCormick's book [Sold](#) (2008) with a small group of high school girls (ages 14-17) in an after school girls' book group. I was a former teacher at the high school and completing my dissertation research at the school site. The impetus for a girls' book group stemmed from my interest in adolescent girls' literacy practices and requests from former students for a 'girls only' reading group. The thematic thread that united the titles was embodiment, or issues related to the body,