

Are We Comfortable Teaching This?

Using Banned Books as a Vehicle for Teaching about World War II-Era Japan & Korea

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Introduction

Teacher educators are pivotal in the effort to prepare teachers to teach in culturally responsive ways (Vescio, et al., 2006). In subject areas such as social studies and English, multicultural literature is viewed as a prime resource for creating a culturally inclusive curriculum. Yet, effective inclusion of these texts—many of which are filled with complex themes and issues and are often labeled controversial—involves knowledge of methods and cultural understanding that are not traditionally taught in education programs (Dong, 2005).

This study explores what teacher educators of color learned from each other about the possibility of teaching a controversial Asian-American children's book such as Yoko Kawashima Watkin's *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* (1986) and its sequel, *My Brother, My Sister, and I* (1996). The sequel, however, did not spark controversy. Specifically, this study discusses how the teacher educators' cultural identities influence how they might help pre-service teachers make sense of and use texts like *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* to teach about Japanese and Korean experiences during World War II.

Data collection and analysis were guided by the following research questions:

1. What did we learn from this book?
2. How do we want to use this book in teacher education courses?
3. How do our cultural identities influence the way we make sense of this book?

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So Far from the Bamboo Grove

So Far from the Bamboo Grove is a children's book about an 11-year-old Japanese girl named Yoko and her family. Yoko lived comfortably in the Northern part of Korea until her family was forced to escape after World War II. This book created controversy in the United States when a Korean-American student refused to go to school while her class studied the novel. Subsequently, school districts in Texas, New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island banned the book because some of the scenes in it were considered too explicit (Kochian, 2006).

There are two perspectives on teaching this book. First, a group of critics (Lee, 2007; Walach, 2008; Eckert, 2006) argue that having students read the book without sufficient historical context is problematic, as this book carries negative stereotypes about Koreans and lacks historical details about Japanese aggression toward Koreans during Japanese colonization (1910-1945). Another critic, Davis (2006), offering a different perspective, notes that this book:

... opens up a new perspective to the war in Asia for American readers who have been taught that the United States "won" World War II. Here the story is told from the 'losers' perspective and recounts what happened to the Japanese after the war, a strategy that aims to teach children lessons about the real victims of war and its aftermath. (p. 192)

As the two conflicting views reveal, the book is not only a piece of children's literature for Grades 5-8, but also a cultural text that can be read from different perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching Controversial Issues

The topic of teaching controversial issues has gained considerable attention

across several content areas, including social studies (Camicia, 2008; King, 2009; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Outlon, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004), science (Levinson, 2006, 2004; Outlon, 2004) and English (Church, 1997). In these studies, controversial issues range from racial, ethnic, and religious considerations as well as environmental topics. We consider an issue controversial when a large number of people argue about it without reaching agreement. The argument frequently focuses what ought to be done about the issue at hand, and is grounded in critical beliefs or understandings people hold about the topic (Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2004; Oulton, 2004).

Although some teachers claim they want to include controversial issues in the classroom, it appears that many teachers feel uncomfortable actually addressing them (Hahn, 1991; King, 2009; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004). Research has found that teachers' personal beliefs on such issues do influence when and how they teach them, and teachers often find themselves persuading rather than instructing students (Cotton, 2006). Teachers also feel that their job security can and will be endangered when teaching about controversial issues.

Hess (2004) identifies four distinct approaches to teaching controversial issues:

1. *Denial*: Teachers do not identify an issue as being controversial, but instead present their views as "truth";
2. *Privilege*: Teachers present a topic as controversial but privilege one perspective;
3. *Avoidance*: Teachers avoid including controversial issues in their curricula; and
4. *Balance*: Teachers present controversial topics from multiple perspectives without favoring one over another.

In many cases, the balanced approach is preferred, but Hess (2004) explains that this approach is difficult because some

people may not identify the issue as being legitimately controversial, and the teacher's ideology will almost necessarily influence the issues and activities they label as being controversial.

Self-Study as Teacher Educators' Professional Development

This research employs self-study as its methodology for three reasons. First, by reflecting on attitudes and beliefs associated with cultural texts—in this case *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* and its sequel, *My Brother, My Sister and I*—the teacher educators in this case can use the study as an opportunity for professional development (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004; Loughran & Russell, 2002; Schubert & Ayers, 1992; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). Second, by interacting with colleagues, these teacher educators “confirm or challenge their developing understandings,” learn “multiple perspectives,” and “justify and interrogate their own assumptions, assertions, and values” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 859). Third, self-study requires the teacher educators to “formalize their work and make it available to their professional community for deliberation, further testing and judgment” (LaBoskey, 860).

This final point is especially important because, despite the growing number of self-studies in teacher education, there have been relatively few self-studies done by teacher educators of color. In reviewing the history of teachers of color in the United States, Dilworth and Brown (2001) worried that as the nation's student population has become increasingly diverse, teachers thought to be most prepared and knowledgeable about culturally sensitive practices—teachers of color—have declined in number. Likewise, Gay (2010) writes, “learning how to read scholarship about cultural diversity also should be a prominent feature of teacher education curricula, especially that produced by scholars of color who deliberately embed cultural nuances and markers in their writing, as more and more are now doing” (p. 146). Gay also emphasizes that, depending on the teacher educators' cultural/ethnic/racial backgrounds, teachers of color bring their own perspective to understanding and working with their own students.

Methodology

As faculty concerned about preparing pre-service teachers to teach in an increasingly diverse world, four teacher educators

established a book club with a self-study focus. They met six times (for one hour each time) over the course of an academic school year to discuss the books *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* and *My Brother, My Sister and I*.

Participants & Contexts

The four teacher educators of color who participated in this study were Emily and Leigh (Korean females), Jake (Japanese American male), and Karen (African American female) (the names are pseudonyms). The four were recruited because of their different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. During data analysis, each teacher educator was given these pseudonyms and a mutually agreed-upon descriptor that arose from his or her background and stance during book discussions.

For instance, Emily was born and raised in Seoul, Korea. After college, she taught social studies in middle schools in South Korea for several years before moving to the United States to pursue a doctorate degree in social studies education. Emily's descriptor is “Historian/Mediator” because of her background in history and her neutral stance to the book.

Jake is a biracial professor with a Japanese mother and a Caucasian father. Jake's descriptor is “Japanese by Default” because of his family's link to Japan, though Jake himself was born and raised in the United States. After graduating from college, he spent 10 years in Japan teaching English. Jake earned his Ph.D. from a university in the Midwest and is now teaching instructional technology.

Karen is an African-American tenured associate professor who grew up in rural North Carolina. She got both her B.S. and M.A. degrees from North Carolina A&T State University, and later moved to the Midwest where she got her Ph.D. in English Education. Karen's descriptor is “Outsider” because of her distinctively different ethnic background from the other participants, who all have Asian backgrounds.

Leigh is a tenured associate professor who teaches reading courses. She was born and raised in Seoul, Korea. After she completed her Bachelor's degree, she moved to the United States to pursue her graduate education. She has lived in the U.S. for 23 years, and has taught undergraduate and graduate literacy education courses for 16 years. Leigh's descriptor is “Insider” because her view of the book was deeply influenced by her Korean heritage.

All four of the teacher educators

teach in a department in a predominately (64%) White public university located on the southern east coast, an institution specifically committed to preparing future teachers.

Process of the Study

Data sources for this study vary, including book forms to analyze *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, recordings and transcriptions of six one-hour-long conversations about the books, meeting notes, and autobiographical sketches. The main data sources were the six hour-long conversations. These conversations were loosely structured and took place in a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The first two conversations consisted of discussions about the book itself, focusing on personal reactions as readers of the book and the controversies that surround the book. Themes for the next four conversations emerged through and from these first two conversations. Initially, *My Brother, My Sister and I* was added as another reading in order to better understand the first book. Then, the theme of the conversations moved from the readers' personal reactions to the book to the pedagogical use of the book as a controversial, multicultural book in teacher education courses. Lastly, as the conversation continued, another theme was added: how the teacher educators' cultural identities shaped their reactions to the book as readers as well as teacher educators.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used for the data analysis. Once the conversations were transcribed, each of the participants wrote a narrative about one of the other group members, identifying themes and patterns emerging from the data. The three research questions were initially used as coding categories to outline the narratives. Then, themes and patterns such as the issue of the historical accuracy of the book, the representation of Korean and Japanese cultures, and human suffering during the war emerged.

As narratives were compared and contrasted with each other, new themes and patterns—such as discomfort and cultural identity—emerged. Triangulation was done by member checking (Bloor, 1983; Fielding & Fielding, 1988). Once the narratives were completed, each of the participants reviewed the narratives written about them for confirmation and reaction. When there was disagreement about how

the participant was represented in the narrative, further conversations were conducted and results from these conversations were added as data (Schwandt, 2001).

Findings

The teacher educators' conversations about the book yielded three emergent themes: cultural identity, discomfort related to cultural identity, and historical accuracy.

Emily, Historian/Mediator

Cultural Identity: Emily feels that discussing Watkins' attempt at portraying both Koreans and Japanese in multidimensional ways is important to address in classrooms. She realizes the topics in *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* are controversial, uncomfortable, and difficult to address, but she believes it is a teacher's job to not avoid texts because the teacher is responsible for teaching against such depictions in a manner that problematizes difficult, and often disturbing, historical events in novels.

When a group member voiced concern about how non-Korean students might perceive Koreans based on Watkins' depiction of Korean characters, Emily said,

My sense is that [Watkins] was respecting Korean culture and Koreans in this story. I don't think [she] said derogatory words toward Koreans or Korean culture.

Emily said that when derogatory names are used to refer to Koreans in the book, teachers should help students trace the words back to the character that spoke them and talk about that character's motives. Emily explained,

I don't think [the students] are going to take [the derogatory words] at face value. Maybe they won't think about it very seriously, I guess, but they will understand it within the context, not just in the line itself.

Discomfort Related to Cultural Identity: Emily's extensive background in social studies accounts for her unique perspective among the members of the group. She carefully selects her responses to group comments and questions, and she is always careful to phrase them in a neutral manner, virtually free of opinion or personal connection. For Emily, it seems that *So Far From the Bamboo Grove*, and the discussions around it, remains relevant when it is positioned as a sample or an artifact used to discuss how history is interpreted and presented by Watkins.

During one discussion, Emily explained her stance while reading the novel: "When I read this book, I tried to stay away from myself as Korean because I know that there are a lot of concerns from the Korean American community.... [So I decided to] read this book as it is, and see how I like it." At another point in the conversation, she reiterated this view, once again illustrating the importance of attempting to divorce her interpretation of the book from her cultural identity as a Korean woman who could easily empathize with Korean Americans who were offended by the book:

At the beginning of this conversation, I said I tried very hard to distance myself from the story because I understand the Korean-American parents' concerns. But I would also like to have some kind of distance because I want to understand this book, and I'm not very judgmental about it. But still whenever I talk about historical accuracy and about the storyline, I feel like I still talk about myself as Korean.

Emily believes it is important to view the book objectively, but she admits it is a struggle, as cultural identity and lived experience are always a part of a reader's interpretation of a novel.

Historical Accuracy: Emily believes *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* can be taught, and she has several suggestions for teaching the novel well. First, Emily suggests that the importance of researching the historical accuracy of events in the novel is essential:

[Watkins] kept talking about Korean Communist soldiers, but history tells us that by this time, August the fifteenth, Korean Communist soldiers were not able to get to the Korean peninsula. It's an historical inaccuracy. [Watkins] was talking about Russians, but we would really like to know if Russians were there at that time or not.

Second, Emily offered ideas about key points a teacher might want to emphasize; for example, the book could be used to illustrate the culture of war: "During war time, people just tried to survive.... Some people are kind, others are not." Emily said the book could also be used to teach students the history of the relationship between Japan and Korea. Emily maintained,

There is a long history between Japan and Korea. They do not treat each other very well. We have to bring in this history.

Jake, Japanese by Default

Cultural Identity: Unlike the others,

Jake shares an ethnic background with the Japanese characters in *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*. Jake's mother, who is Japanese, lived in Taiwan during World War II and experienced turmoil similar to that depicted in the novel when the United States bombed Japanese bases in Taiwan and while she was a refugee returning from there to Japan.

Jake has impressively clear knowledge about the Russia/Japan conflict at the end of World War II, and he explained in detail why the Japanese feared Russian soldiers. He also shared information that suggested that Taiwan and Japan now are not as hostile to each other as Korea and Japan were during or after the War.

Jake argued that teachers who share *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* with their students need to be neutral and avoid making judgments:

If I were teaching [the novel], I wouldn't want to be too judgmental about anything because I'd want *them* to encounter the material in their way and make sense of it in a way that's right for them. I might try and guide and push a little using questions or something like that....I'd like to see them come to some appreciation of where they're at and the fact that they don't have to encounter these kinds of things. I hope it would spark their imagination a little bit as to what they would or wouldn't do if they were ever in dire straits like that.

Jake went on to suggest that teachers use questions like the following to encourage students to develop interpretations that make sense to them:

What do you think? How much do you really know about either Korea or Japan after having read this? What do you think you know? Do you think this book tells you anything?

Discomfort Related to Cultural Identity: Jake is biracial: White and, as stated earlier, Japanese. He expressed discomfort with the depiction of some of the characters and events, but he also managed to view the book objectively. Jake attempted to disassociate himself from the graphic atrocities perpetrated by Japanese characters in an effort to maintain an emotional distance. At one point during the conversation, Jake said,

Probably I shouldn't say this, but I was just thinking how, in many ways, grateful or thankful that I am that I live in the time that I do and the context that I do. I think within all of us there's a lot of both light and darkness. I think ... every human being has both a good and a bad

side. And to the extent that the good comes out or the bad comes out is dependent a great deal on the circumstances that you find yourself in at the time. I don't know what kind of cruelties I'm capable of, and I'm very thankful that I'm not in a situation where I'm likely to find out either. So to some extent when I'm reading some of these things, that's a lot of what's actually going through my mind. I guess I kind of take a half a step back when I read material like this; I almost need to emotionally disassociate myself a little bit because some of this stuff is really heavy.

While Jake does not attempt to excuse the cruel events and actions of the characters in the novel (or actual historical occurrences), he seems to suggest that those of us outside the time period may not be in the best position to truly grasp the characters' (or actual historical figures') motivations for doing what they did. Jake's response reflects the opposite of what happens within Leigh's response below. Wherein Leigh seemed to have a difficult time believing that her particular cultural group (Koreans) could/would act in certain ways, Jake does not deny that his (Japanese) or Leigh's could act in such ways, but he does challenge whether those of us outside that time period can *fully* (1) understand the motivation behind their actions and (2) declare that if in a similar situation we would have reacted differently.

Historical Accuracy: Jake thinks the events in *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* are factual, but realizes that since human memory may fade, readers need to be cautious about the historical accuracy of the book. Jake was always more likely to place importance on the essence or spirit of the historical period than on whether individual details were accurate. Even when the conversation would shift from historical accuracy to verisimilitude, as it often did, Jake would emphasize the author's attempt to capture the essence of the period, as in this exchange:

Leigh: The novel said that no one wanted to help the girls because the Korean men will be angry and bomb the warehouse. I think this is total fiction. This is misrepresentation. I know the Koreans are angry, but this does not mean that the Koreans are vindictive and they plan to bomb the warehouse.

Jake: The author is presenting the fear that was their thinking. Whether or not the Korean men would have done that, is a separate issue. That was their thinking and that's why no one did anything. That was their level of fear.

When Jake did question whether something Watkins included in the book was real, such as the school the main character, Yoko, attends, he researched it, and told the group what he learned: "The Sagano Girls' School is still in operation. Her whole experience at the Sagano Girls' School [was negative]." Though the girls' cruelty toward Yoko bothered him, Jake never questioned whether it was accurate, he simply used it as an opportunity to discuss human connections: "Even in those depths, you find the friends, you find the people who will talk to you and will accept you as a human being, so Mr. Naido, for example, [served that purpose for Yoko]."

Karen, Outsider

Cultural Identity: Although Karen did not share a cultural or ethnic background with anyone in the story, she used her own background to make sense of and relate to the characters. For example, she reacted to sections of the story where the Japanese children, fluent in Korean, successfully pretended to be Korean in order to escape detection. "That interested me, too, this business of passing...putting on the clothes and pretending to be Korean to get to escape or get to safety, really intrigued me." And later,

... and that happens or happened within African-American culture and sometimes it still does. Where people have reported being with the dominate culture and then saying derogatory things and then the person either deciding—I'm going to stand up and say how dare you, you don't know who you are in the midst of—or I'm just going to be quiet and I'm just going to pretend like I'm one of you.

In addition, in response to the comment from Leigh above wherein she expressed skepticism that Korean men would really bomb a warehouse containing Japanese people, Karen responded, "Do you believe in White people lynching Black people and anyone else they did not like? They just lit them on fire." The individual who originally wrote Karen's narrative interpreted Karen's reaction as her reaching into her African-American heritage and universalizing it: If Whites are capable of such behavior, then Asians (specifically Koreans) are too.

Subsequent member checking put the statement in a different light. Karen explained that her intent was more to challenge Leigh; if she can believe that Whites would engage in the behaviors Karen described, why can't she believe that Koreans could engage in similar behaviors? So the

point was not so much one about human capacity for wrong or even evil behavior, rather it was a probe to gauge Leigh's thinking.

Discomfort Related to Cultural Identity: Although Karen did not evidence much discomfort with the events depicted in the book itself, she again was able to use her own background and experience to wonder about how other Westerners might interpret the events in the book.

That's one of the things that kind of scares me about when people want to give books like this to students and say...learn something about this cultural group from this book. I'm just very uncomfortable with that...I think that's a lot to ask of a book. ...If you give a kid the book *Push* by Sapphire, and say, "Learn something about Black people from this..."

Though she left the thought unfinished, all in the group understood her point. Without a solid background, readers might very well be prone to misunderstanding.

Historical Accuracy: Karen's "outsider" status became evident when she mentioned early on that she is not familiar with the history of the relationship between Korea and Japan during World War II:

I was not very familiar with the history and so I found myself asking a lot of questions that students may want to know if a teacher does not situate this with a better context. I had no idea why the Koreans were so upset with the Japanese. I really didn't.

And while not outright questioning the accuracy of the depiction, Karen does wonder about the meaning of some of what was related in the book. At one point there is a discussion of clothing and being able to tell a person's ethnicity by their dress.

So did that mean that people opted, based on their nationality, to wear certain styles of clothing? Or was it because Korea was occupied or was colonized by Japan? Were they forced to wear certain clothes?

Presumably Karen would feel differently about the situation depending on whether the former or the latter were true. As she later said, "I just wasn't sure how far colonization went, because you know, sometimes when people take over something, they try to take over everything."

Leigh, Insider as a Korean

Cultural Identity: Leigh related to *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* in a couple of different ways. As a person who was born and educated in South Korea before she

came to the United States for graduate study, Leigh did not shy away from having her voice heard as a South Korean who cares about the way her own ethnic group is represented in the book. Pointing out the scenes where Koreans humiliate Japanese women in public, Leigh commented,

It [the book] said that no one wanted to help the girls because the Korean men will be angry and bomb the warehouse. I think this is total fiction. This is misrepresentation. I know the Koreans are angry, this does not mean that the Koreans are vindictive and they planned to bomb the warehouse.

She continued, “Americans that are reading this piece may think, wow. As a Korean person, I am afraid American readers will not have facts [about what happened]” and that will “misrepresent the nature of beautiful Korean culture.”

While Leigh worries about the potential impact of this book on American readers’ image of Korea, she related personally to the main characters. Yoko and her brother and sister experience hardships when they escape the Korean peninsula and after returning to Japan. She mentioned, “I was so amazed of these young girls’ strength and their survival skills.”

She used her own childhood experience and experience as a Korean immigrant to the United States to make sense of their experiences. For instance, when discussing the episode where Ko, Yoko’s sister, yelled at Yoko’s effort to search for food on the street in order to celebrate their brother’s birthday, Leigh mentioned, “Their arguments also reminded me of childhood fighting with my own older sister growing up, so it actually gave me a lot of smiling moments.” She also added,

They used the apple boxes as a dinner table. That also reminded me of the early years of difficult immigrant life. I first came to this country with one suitcase. Didn’t have anything to eat off of, so I used the cardboard box, upside down, and that was my dinner table (laughs).

Discomfort Related to Cultural Identity: Although she felt a connection to the characters, it is worth noting that Leigh responded strongly against the book. Leigh appeared uncomfortable and puzzled when Koreans were depicted negatively. For example, when a Japanese character in the book refers to Koreans as “lousy people” Leigh said,

[the book] says, ‘lousy Koreans’. It’s name-calling. So name-calling, you know, it can instill a belief that Koreans are associated

with lousiness, lousy people. So there is a danger of creating that prejudice, new prejudice, maybe. Kids might not have any prejudice toward Koreans. They may have never met any Koreans, but reading this, because they are so naïve, with a clean slate, this can add... [prejudice].

Not only concerned about the misrepresentation of Korean people in the book, Leigh raised questions about the truthfulness of some of the episodes in the book and eventually the genre of the book. Regarding the scene that mentions Korean men raping Japanese women on Independence Day, Leigh asked,

Do you believe that rape happened on Independence Day [when everyone celebrated Korea’s political independence from Japan]? I think that this [book] is a biographic sketch. [But] I think some of the stories are made up. I just think it did not happen.

Given the “fictional” element of the book, Leigh argued that *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* is a biographical sketch but should be considered juvenile fiction.

Leigh was also uncomfortable about the fact that teachers who might not know much about the historical context of the story can use the book in their classrooms. She explained that this book was considered a controversial book “because of many negative images [of Korean people]” and that “they [teachers] may not be as sensitive as I” when they teach it.

For that reason, Leigh suggested that “we [teacher educators] provide guidance for teachers” and “provide more background information so students will not take away... [the negative image of Korean people].” In addition to emphasizing, “We [teacher educators] need to write a list of supplementary materials for the teachers,” she said, “If the teachers want to use this book, they need to use another book that shows a Korean perspective during World War II.”

Historical Accuracy: In terms of historical accuracy, Leigh noted that *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* misses some significant historical facts such as the accurate year and date of Korean Independence Day and the reason why Japan lost the war (e.g., the atomic bombing). She pointed out,

Korea declared its Independence from Japan on August 15, 1945. I think this is a very important historical date. [The book] says the story starts on July 29, 1945. That is actually 15, no 14 days, after the Independence Day and the book does not say when was the Independence Day. So the book only talks about two weeks after that event.

She explained the date of the Independence Day is important because what happened that day was the reason why “Mother, Ko, and Yoko decide to flee their home, their neighbors, [and] their friends forever.” Another fact that Leigh believes is “not there” is that “Japan occupied Korea for 45 years.” Leigh mentioned, “45 years, a half century, is to be highlighted, I think. The time period when this event [Japanese occupation of Korea] occurred.”

Although Leigh pointed out the missing historical facts in the novel, she admitted that the atmosphere of the time period was accurately depicted in the book and, as a reader, she learned that Japanese felt fear of revenge from Koreans at the end of the occupation. She commented,

Yoko said she hasn’t had a night of sleep in two weeks because of the air raids. You can imagine the bombing, the sound, the gunshots, and that horrible personal experience that Yoko went through.

Leigh also quoted Yoko, “No Koreans know that the Japanese family was leaving the town” and said, “I guess they have to flee the area secretly because if the Koreans find out what will they do? Will they capture the family and hurt them?” Leigh also said she learned how horrible the war could be. During the wartime, Japanese soldiers hurt not only Koreans but also Japanese and at times people tossed the bodies of dead babies from the medical trains. She also learned historical facts such as: Japan was at war with not only the United States, but the British for four years.

Discussion

One of the first observations that became obvious when examining the responses of the four teachers to Watkins’ work was the diversity of the reactions. This was consistent with our observation earlier that individual teachers react differently to controversial topics. Hess’s (2004) framework provided an enlightening lens through which to view the reactions of the four teachers. Leigh seemed closest to *denial*, or perhaps *privilege*. She was convinced of the truth of her position regarding Koreans and Korean culture. When the book presents events that were at odds with Leigh’s vision of Korea, she dismissed the portrayal as fictional.

The other three seemed to have a more *balanced* approach. Emily was the one who was probably the most typical example of someone trying to take a balanced approach in Hess’s sense. She discussed how she deliberately monitored her emotional

reactions and moved herself from siding with fellow Koreans to a more neutral stance. This was consistent with Hess's (2004) description of a teacher trying to teach without favoring a particular perspective.

Jake, too, seemed to use emotional detachment as a way of achieving balance, though in his case from the opposite side. As his descriptor, Japanese by Default, implies, however, he did often end up taking or explaining the Japanese side. This was no doubt to some extent an artifact of the fact that he was the only person in the group with a Japanese background. It is probably also true, however, that having been raised in the United States put some distance between Jake and a stronger Japanese identity. Had he been born and raised in Japan (as Leigh was in Korea), he might have had a different reaction to the story.

The truest outsider in the group was Karen, who also showed balance. Unlike the others, her balanced approach seems to be an artifact of her outsider status. Having cultural ties to neither Korea nor Japan meant she had the least personal emotional investment in the depictions of the story. Her reactions were based on her own history as an African-American woman concerned with multicultural education and critical approaches to literature.

Karen's inquisitive stance and her recognition of the limits of her own knowledge were the defining characteristics of her reaction to the story. She knew what she didn't know, and this tempered her reaction; nonetheless, her grounding in her own experience did allow her to challenge others in the group, as she did with Leigh. Further, she was able to use her own cultural identity to create links for herself as a reader with the characters in the book, as when she picked up on the Japanese children successfully passing as Korean.

The reactions of the teacher educators in this study appear to support Hess's framework. The extent and type of emotional investment that a teacher has in a topic can strongly influence which of Hess's categories that teacher may fit. Leigh's strong reaction was noted (and welcomed) by the group with much laughter and humor. But there did seem to be an underlying consensus among the group that students should be able to form their own opinions and that teachers should not try to indoctrinate their students.

Discomfort

One of the emergent themes identified by the teacher educators was the

discomfort felt with the book. However, it was interesting that this discomfort took different manifestations depending on the reader. Of all the themes, this was perhaps the one where the group was most divergent. Everyone seemed to feel discomfort for different reasons. Emily and Leigh were perhaps the closest to each other. Emily acknowledged her emotional and cultural ties to Korea and to those who might be offended by the book, but deliberately pulled herself back to a more neutral stance. Leigh apparently felt no such compulsion, taking the strong stance that since she was more sensitive to the issue she (or others like her) should provide guidance for the presumably less sensitive non-Korean teachers who might use the book in the classroom.

The reaction of the non-Koreans in the group to some extent supports Leigh's supposition: neither Karen nor Jake demonstrated the same sort of discomfort as Leigh. To the extent that Karen demonstrated any discomfort with the book, it was in terms of a more general concern about the extent to which one book (or depiction) could serve as evidence for or about a particular group. Jake's discomfort seemed to come less from any cultural association with Japan (though in his role of Japanese by Default, that was to some extent a factor) than from a more personal connection wherein he empathized as the father of a daughter with the father-less daughter Yoko. It was her treatment as an individual that bothered Jake; not so much the depictions of any of the groups in the story.

Cultural Identity

It perhaps goes without saying that a person's cultural identity will affect how they interpret works of literature. Certainly that was the case here. Leigh identified strongly with her Korean heritage, and reacted strongly to what she saw as unflattering depictions of Korea. Yet Emily, who also identified with her Korean heritage, did not react in the same way. Indeed, she provided an ameliorating contrast to Leigh by specifically stating that she thought Watkins was being respectful to Koreans.

This raises the question of interpretation, and of how much of a work is the author's and how much the reader's. Assuming that Watkins never meant to be disrespectful to Koreans, Leigh nonetheless felt disrespected. On the other hand, assume Watkins did have nefarious motive in depicting Koreans as she did; Emily was not affected. On this theme, Emily and

Jake were perhaps the most in tune with each other, as both advocated for a neutral approach by the teacher which would challenge students to explore their own thinking and examine their own reactions.

The findings here also lend some support to the idea that you can be too close to a situation, and that it takes an outsider to make some interesting observations. Neither of the Koreans picked up on scenes where the Japanese children pretended to be Korean in order to get food or safe passage; it was Karen and Jake who commented on that. This is interesting as it raises questions about cultural identity, and what constitutes identity. Though the Japanese children in the story never identified as Korean, they were able to assume enough trappings of Korean identity to pass. This is another area where the novel offers a "teachable moment" about what it means not only to identify as a member of a particular group, but how (or what cues) we use to assign identity to others.

Historical Accuracy

In this thematic area, as well, we found the most convergence between Emily and Leigh, who both questioned the historical accuracy of specific events or depictions in the book. On one level, such elements would be less open to interpretation, as historical facts can be checked. Jake's point remained an important one, however. A work such as *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, which relies on remembered events, might not be strictly historically accurate, but can still be true in a broader sense. Interesting discussions can result from exploring that interplay. Karen showed the way, with her curiosity about what she didn't know, and her quest for clarification.

Using such quests for clarification may be a useful springboard for deeper learning through which teachers and students can explore the contrast between a war-time culture and the culture of many students who read the book. Even the otherwise skeptical Leigh agreed that the atmosphere of the time was accurately depicted. Again, this seemed to demonstrate the importance of interpretation. The same work generated both skepticism and immersion in the same person.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the teacher educators in this study agreed that there is value in teaching this controversial multicultural book. Though it contains potentially uncomfortable social and historical issues,

it was nonetheless viewed as beneficial in a teacher education program. As this self study found, reading a controversial book enhances awareness of multiple interpretations and contradicting responses to a text driven by each reader's unique cultural and social background. Through reading and debating issues in such a book in a teacher education course, teacher candidates will experience divergent reactions to one piece of literature. Thus, teacher candidates may better understand the significance of allowing students to express their interpretations, since students in today's diverse classrooms will and should offer differing perspectives when making sense of a book using their own personal connections.

When discussing controversial issues, teachers should provide additional historical and contextual facts to assist students in accurately evaluating various dimensions of the situation, and attempt to solve problems in a fair and peaceful manner. When reading and discussing *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, readers will be exposed to Korean and Japanese culture and life during World War II, and thereby learn to respect different views, enhancing their own critical thinking skills. Those are skills that are essential for everyone in solving this world's conflicts and controversial issues, whether one is a professor, a teacher, a teacher candidate, or a child in school.

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