

The Need for Diverse Picture Books in Japan

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Abstract

Picture books are often used in Japanese classrooms to teach valuable lessons about how to behave in society. Until recently, Japanese education has placed much emphasis on conformity and group dynamics. Japanese demographics are rapidly changing, however, due to an increase in the immigrant population and cross-cultural marriage. Also, people are becoming aware of the importance of including those who have hitherto hovered on the margins of society. In order for children to prepare for and develop an awareness of diversity, they should be exposed to picture books featuring diverse characters in everyday situations. This paper will discuss the importance of diverse picture books, the current state of diversity in picture book publishing in Japan and suggest ways to increase the publication of books about multicultural and minority populations in Japan.

(Keywords: children, books, diversity, education, multicultural, minority)

1. Background

1.1 Importance of Diverse Books for Children

In the spring of 2014, two Asian American young adult writers, Malinda Lo and Ellen Oh, launched a campaign to encourage diversity in children's publishing in the United States. Now officially titled *We Need Diverse Books*, the movement seeks to address the dearth of minority characters in books for children. According to an infographic produced in June, 2013, by Lee & Low, an American publisher of multicultural children's picture books, although 37% of American children are non-white, only 10% of children's books published that year featured multicultural content. The *We Need Diverse Books* campaign seeks not only to increase the number of books about the experiences of those of color, but also (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, gender diversity, people with

disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.

In her 1990 essay “Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop, a professor of education at Ohio State University, writes:

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part...Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds. They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans. In this country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves. If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism.

Although Bishop was writing about the importance of multicultural books for American children, the same holds true for Japan. Traditionally, Japanese children were taught that “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Since the 1980s, however, the idea of Japan as a multicultural society has been gaining ground. Meanwhile, children’s publishing in Japan does not reflect this trend. While many translations of foreign children’s picture books and books about foreign children in foreign countries by Japanese authors are published in this country each year, there are few realistic children’s picture books featuring multicultural characters in Japan.

As Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie said in her 2009 TED talk “The Danger of a Single Story”:

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.

Through reading about children who are different, Japanese children can likewise understand similarities between themselves and others.

1.2 Diverse Populations in Japan

As the eminent Japanese sociologist Yoshio Sugimoto writes, “For decades, the Japanese leadership had inculcated in the populace the myths of Japanese racial purity and of the ethnic superiority which was supposed to be guaranteed by the uninterrupted lineage of the imperial household over centuries” (Sugimoto, 2010, p. 189). In the years of Japan’s economic growth, “many observers attributed Japan’s economic success and political stability to Japan’s racial and ethnic homogeneity” (Sugimoto, 2010). Even as recently as November, 2014, American President Barack Obama erroneously credited Japan’s homogeneity for its low crime rate.

In truth, however, “some five percent of the Japanese population can be classified as members of minority groups” (Sugimoto, 2010). These include the indigenous Ainu of Hokkaido, descendants of Koreans who were brought to Japan forcibly during World War II, and descendants of the Burakumin class. According to the Buraku Liberation League (BLL), the Japanese government has officially recognized 4,442 Buraku areas, with the largest number being in Fukuoka Prefecture. The BLL maintains that there are actually around 6,000 areas, comprising three million Burakumin, which is 2.38% of the population of Japan. In a 2009 interview, Shigeru Yasuda, the Deputy Secretary General of the Kyoto chapter of the BLL stated that although educational achievement has improved for children from Buraku areas, graduation rates still lag behind those of non-Burakumin children, which may be due in part to issues of low self-esteem. Furthermore, currently, 6% of Japanese marriages are between a Japanese national and a foreigner, and almost 10% of Tokyo marriages are international. Certain areas, such as Hamamatsu, which is home to a high number of South Americans of Japanese descent, have higher minority populations.

Although the minority population in Japan is relatively small compared to that of the United States, racism and discrimination are persistent problems here as well. Furthermore, according to a 2008 survey, non-heterosexual Japanese youth are six times more likely to commit suicide than those who identify as heterosexual (Stonewall Japan, 2013). Children who are perceived as different are frequently targeted by bullies while teachers stand aside, expecting kids to work out conflicts on their own (Gillis-Furutaka, 1999, Nishikura & Takagi, 2013). Bullying and suicide among school children are constant topics in Japanese mass media.

Even small children are aware of differences in race, class, and culture. If they are given opportunities to think about these differences at an early age, they have a better chance of growing into compassionate, open-minded adults. Although they may not live in diverse communities, they will no doubt encounter someone who is of a different socio-economic class, from a non-

traditional family, a different religion, differently abled, or differently gendered at some time in their lives. Picture books featuring diversity can spark discussions and awareness about these differences in children who have never encountered them in real life. For children who are themselves a member of a minority in Japan, picture books featuring diverse characters can be empowering.

2. Representations of Diversity in Japanese Books for Children

2.1 Diversity in Japanese Textbooks

Textbooks used in Japanese elementary schools for language classes typically include translations of stories from abroad, such as *Swimmy* by Leo Leoni, folktales from abroad, such as the Russian folktale *The Giant Radish*, or stories introducing foreign cultures such as *Suho no Shiroi Uma (Suho's White Horse)* by Suekichi Akaba, which takes place in Mongolia.

In recent years, textbooks for English-language learners in Japan have become increasingly inclusive. For example, the Monbusho-approved New Horizon textbook for second year junior high school students includes a story about a seeing-eye dog, which might provoke discussions in the classroom about accessibility. Another story, "Try to Be the Only One," introduces Aragaki Tsutomu, the son of a Mexican-American father and Japanese mother who was born blind. Tsutomu was brought up in Okinawa and became a Christian. This story addresses diversity in a variety of ways – through race, religion, and ability. It also carries a positive message about asserting one's individuality.

There are few or no depictions of diversity in textbooks for other subjects, however, such as Social Studies, Mathematics, or Japanese. Children may begin to associate diversity only with English and foreign countries, or Moral Education classes, instead of thinking naturally of Japan as a site of diversity.

2.2 An Overview of Children's Picture Books in Japan

Japanese children have access to a variety of books from different countries as many foreign picture books have been translated into Japanese. Themes often include family relationships, love of nature, and friendship. Japanese picture books are often populated with animal or other non-human characters. Of the books awarded the Bungeisha Picture Book Prize over the past seven years, only three featured human characters. One book was about a girl at the sea, another, a warm-hearted story about a boy and his grandfather, and another, a story of two friends. There are no depictions of children representing minorities.

As Sachie Asaka, a member of the Faculty of Policy Studies at Nanzan

University has pointed out, many Japanese picture books encourage diversity and tolerance through stories featuring non-human characters. She cites the Neko-Zakana (Cat-Fish) series by Yuichi Watanbe, about a cat and fish who like each other and travel together, and the Arashi no Yoru series, about a wolf who is friends with a goat, as examples of inter-species cooperation which could help small children understand the importance of getting along with those who are different. She also mentions the Daruma-chan series, which features a daruma who encounters various animals, such as a rabbit and tiger, and other supernatural beings:

“The characters in this series live in Japan in their own territory, never invading the territory of others. This is what is called ‘sumi-wake’ (coexistence) in Japanese...These picture books describe calm and peaceful relationships between different creatures. This series consequently presents a manner of coexistence between different cultures before the government passed the ‘Amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act’ (1990).”

While the use of animal characters in a fantasy world is a gentle way of introducing difficult themes, and possibly broadens the appeal of these books to international audiences, it is still important for children to see themselves and diverse human children in Japan realistically portrayed in picture books. If children do not see themselves represented in books, TV shows, movies and art, they will absorb the message that they do not matter as much as those in the mainstream, that their lives and experiences are inferior to those of children with more typical backgrounds, lifestyles and abilities. For a child who uses a wheelchair in daily life, the image of a child adeptly using a wheelchair can be validating and empowering. For a bicultural child in Japan, finding someone with similar experiences, even in a book, can help him to feel less isolated.

Deborah Pope of the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation writes:

“There are many books that teach diversity as an issue or highlight the holidays of different ethnic groups. But it is also important to expose your child to books that feature children of different races or ethnicities doing everyday things – talking about what they want to be when they grow up, having an adventure, or playing in the snow like Peter, the main character in [Ezra Jack Keats’] *The Snowy Day*...There are many picture books that cloak diversity messages in stories where animals, robots and aliens have human qualities. But children also need to see picture books that illustrate real children of various ethnicities and races

all getting along.” (2011)

In other words, while a child may enjoy and benefit from entering a fantasy world of animals playing together, and may identify with non-human characters, older children especially also need more explicit images of integration.

3. Ways to Promote Diversity in Japanese Publishing

Publishing is a business, therefore editors and publishers must give some thought to potential demand for their products when they are choosing manuscripts. Many publishers may resist publishing books featuring minority cultures and characters due to a perceived limited demand for such titles. (Zgadzaj & Roberts, 2013) Parents and educators should therefore ask librarians, booksellers, and publishers for titles reflecting diversity in Japan. If there is a perceived demand, they will be more likely to consider diverse picture books in the future.

Another way of promoting diversity in publication is through awards and prizes. In the United States, the Schneider Family Award was established in 2003 to recognize books “that artistically represent the disability experience.” Three winners – one for a picture book, one for a middle grade book, and one for a young adult book -- receive five thousand dollars each, and are honored in a ceremony at the American Library Association’s annual conference. The money awarded offers a financial incentive to writers and illustrators, and the post-award publicity incites sales of the winning titles. Another award, the Dolly Gray Children’s Literature Award was established in 2000 to honor “authors, illustrators, and publishers of high quality fictional and biographical children’s, intermediate and young adult books that appropriately portray individuals with developmental disabilities.” Other awards for books about potentially marginalized communities include the Lee and Low New Voices Award for outstanding picture books by writers of color, and the Stonewall Award for books about the LBGT community.

The establishment of similar awards in Japan would encourage writers and illustrators to produce stories featuring diverse characters, and would also create opportunities for the promotion of these books in the media. Also, consumers are often encouraged to purchase books which have been deemed worthy of prestigious awards.

Publishers could create teaching guides, consisting of supplementary background information, related activities, and questions for discussion. These guides could be published on-line or in the back of select books. With such resources readily available, busy teachers would be more likely to include books on diversity in their lessons. Japanese parents, who typically see reading

to children as an opportunity to teach cultural values and discipline, could also refer to these guides when reading at home.

Japanese educators can encourage the publication of such books by using them in their classrooms, by requesting them from booksellers and librarians, and through encouraging students to write about diverse characters and writing diverse stories themselves.

4. Conclusion

Japanese children have access to a wide variety of picture books with various themes. Through reading these books in the classroom and at home, they can learn about foreign countries, nature, friendship, and the importance of family. However, there is a shortage of picture books representing diversity in Japan. Although reading picture books is not the solution to all of society's problems, it is a gentle way of introducing multicultural ideas and promoting tolerance. When images of children with disabilities, children of different races, and other differences appear in textbook images and children's picture books set in Japan as a matter of course, we will know that Japan is on its way to being a truly multicultural society.

Suggested Books in English

- *The East-West House: Noguchi's Childhood in Japan* written and illustrated by Christy Hale (Lee & Low, 2009)
This non-fiction picture book introduces the childhood of noted biracial sculptor Isamu Noguchi, whose mother was American and whose father was Japanese. He was brought up in a single parent household.
- *How My Parents Learned to Eat* written by Ina Friedman, illustrated by Allen Say (HMH Books for Young Readers, 1984)
The author was inspired by the meeting of her American father and Japanese mother in Japan. Although somewhat dated and playing to stereotypes, this is a light-hearted, humorous tale of a man who feels that he must learn how to use chopsticks in order to woo a young Japanese woman who, in turn, asks her more cosmopolitan relative how to use a fork and knife so that she can go on a date with an American.
- *The Favorite Daughter* written and illustrated by Allen Say (Arthur A. Levine Books, 2013)
Although this book is set in the United States, it is one of few books in which one parent is Japanese and one parent is Caucasian. In this story, a girl is teased about her Japanese name when she goes to school for the first time, however, she learns to appreciate her individuality.

Additionally, the girl's parents are divorced and live separately, which is increasingly common in Japan as well, though single parent families are seldom represented in Japanese picture books. In one illustration, the Japanese father is preparing a meal, contrary to traditional gender expectations in Japan.

- *Tea with Milk* written and illustrated by Allen Say (HMH Books for Young Readers, 1999)

The main character of this story returns to Japan after having grown up in America and finds it difficult to adapt. The author himself was the child of a Korean father and a Japanese mother who'd been brought up in America and later returned to Japan.

- *The Wakame Gatherers* by Holly Thompson, illustrated by Kazumi Wild (Shen's Books, 2007)

A biracial girl with an American mother and Japanese father comes to Japan to spend the summer with her Japanese grandmother and learns about gathering seaweed. This book offers a rare glimpse of a bicultural child in Japan.

- *Two Mrs. Gibsons* by Toyomi Igus (Demco Media, 2002)

A girl tells about two women in her life, one an African American, and one a Japanese woman, who share the name "Mrs. Gibson." As it turns out, they are both the narrator's grandmothers. Set in the United States, this is a rare example of a book about a bicultural family in which one parent is African American and one parent is Japanese.

- *Playing for Papa/en el equipo de papa* by Suzanne Kamata, illustrated by Yuka Hamano. (Topka Books, 2008)

This is the story of a bicultural family living in Tokushima. A boy whose mother is American longs to play baseball with his busy Japanese father. One of the characters uses a wheelchair, but disability is not the main focus of the story, nor is race.

Suggested Books in Japanese

- 「あ・そ・ぼ」やで! by Shigenori Kusunoki, illustrated by Fumiyo Kono (Kumon Shuppansha, 2014)

A biracial girl (French/Japanese) begins school in Japan and is overwhelmed by her classmates' behavior. Although she can speak Japanese, they treat her as "other" rather than accepting her as one of them. But then she meets a boy who was displaced by an earthquake and was also recently new to the school. In addition to its nuanced portrayal of cross-cultural interactions, this book shows a friendship between a girl and a boy.

- 「ローラのすてきな耳」 by Elfi Nijssen, illustrated by Eline van Lindenhuizen (朝日学生新聞社, 2011)
This is a translation of a Belge picture book about a girl who is deaf and uses a hearing aid. Although the story is set in a foreign country, the setting is not explicit, and two of the characters have Asian features. The children featured are multicultural.
- 「おたまさんのおかいさん」 written by The Publishing Company for the Hinode Picture Book, illustrated by Yoshifumi Hasegawa. (Kaiho Shuppansha, 2002)
This is a lively story set in post-WWII Osaka about villagers in Hinode Village, a segregated area where members of formerly discriminated castes were supposed to live. Although poor, the villagers support each other through hardship. Based on a true story, this book was recognized by the Kodansha Publication Culture Award for Children's Picture Books in 2003.
- It-chan いちちゃん written by Yukiko Ninomiya, illustrated by Yasunari Murakami, (The Buraku Liberation Publishing House, 2007)
Itchan is a boy with one eye in the middle of his head, which makes him different from his two-eyed classmates. He becomes friends with a girl in his class who has no eyes, nose or mouth. Although this story is more fantastic than realistic, it does offer a gentle approach to the issue of accommodating and accepting difference.
- 「どんなかんじかなあ」written by Chinatsu Nakayama, illustrated by Wada (自由国民社, 2005)
Thinking of his friend Mari who is blind, a boy imagines what it is like to be unsighted.

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