

# The Voices of Children: Re-imagining the Internment of Japanese Americans through Poetry

Elizabeth M. Frye and Lisa A. Hash

In this article, we describe just one activity from an interdisciplinary social justice unit<sup>1</sup> taught to two fifth-grade social studies classes with the use of Cynthia Kadohata's multicultural historical fiction novel *Weedflower*.<sup>2</sup> Often, our younger students feel their voices are silenced...their messages are not heard. Like many of our fifth-grade students, the main characters in Kadohata's novel are marginalized peoples whose voices were kept silent during a time of war hysteria. In this historical novel, Sumiko, a young Japanese American girl and her family are forced to relocate to Poston Internment Camp after the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Poston, located in southwestern Arizona, was the largest of the ten internment camps (or "prison camps," as many of its former residents called it) operated by the U.S. government during World War II. While at Poston, Sumiko befriends Frank, a young Mojave Indian who lives on the neighboring reservation.

## The Constitution's Promises and Principles

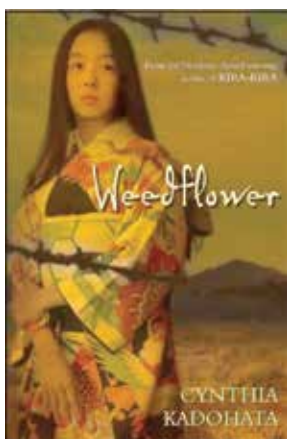
While learning about the internment camps, students also learn about the U.S. Constitution—how its promises were first violated, and then, many years later, partially redeemed.

The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution states, in part: "No person shall be...deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation."

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 forcing Americans of Japanese ancestry into internment camps. This executive order violated the constitutional safeguards of Japanese American citizens in the name of national defense. Years later, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Japanese Americans Citizens League petitioned the government for an apology and reparations. For these Japanese Americans, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was the impetus behind their movement. It reads in part: "Congress shall make no law...abridging...the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Some redress happened more than 40 years later, when President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 and formally apologized to the surviving internees. Furthermore, the U.S. Government paid reparations to former internees or their heirs, admitted that the internment was due to racial prejudice and wartime paranoia, and acknowledged that no Japanese

American was ever found guilty of endangering the U.S. during World War II. (Indeed, President Roosevelt recognized that the then-territory of Hawaii would collapse without its business leaders, administrators, engineers, and other civil servants—most of whom were of Japanese American descent. Only a handful of them were ever detained.)



## Composing "I Am" Poetry

At the end of this interdisciplinary unit, our fifth graders collaboratively composed "I Am" poetry from the perspectives of Sumiko and Frank in *Weedflower*. Teachers and students then worked together to transform these poems into digital movies and upload and post them at TeacherTube, spreading the messages of social justice and social activism beyond the borders of these fifth-grade classrooms.

In an interview with Cynthia Kadohata and Tony Hudz, director of Audible's Audiobook version of *Weedflower*, Kadohata expressed her hope that kids reading *Weedflower* would "read historical novels and put themselves in the place of the main characters ... in other words, perceiving the main characters as human beings rather than being emblematic of an issue."

"I Am" Poems are written in the first person where the poet assumes the identity of the poem's subject. Through imaginative entry, the poet becomes the person, place, animal, or object about which he/she is writing. When students are invited to write "I" Poems, they may deepen their literary understandings

## AN OUTLINE FOR AN “I AM” POEM

FIRST STANZA	SECOND STANZA	THIRD STANZA
I am	I question	I say
I live	I feel	I believe
I wonder	I touch	I dream
I hear	I worry	I try
I see	I cry	I hope
I want	I understand	I was once
I am	I am	But now I
		I am



Figure 1

of a particular character, setting, or plot from children’s novels.<sup>3</sup> In addition to deepening literary understandings, we were interested in students deepening their historical understandings based on evidence acquired from the Internet Workshops and *Weedflower*. Thus, we invited one class to write an “I Am” Poem from the perspective of Sumiko, a Japanese American girl living in an internment camp, and the other class to write an “I Am” Poem from the perspective of Frank, a young Mohave Indian, who was displaced from his land when the internment camps were created. The students were invited to write about their respective character, include specific historical information about the character (evidence learned through Internet Workshops and additional research), and develop a sense of wonder or curiosity through the use of poetic language and literary devices. As students engaged in this perspective recognition activity, they used a version of Levstik and Barton’s “I Am” poem outline.<sup>4</sup> The poem outline, or template, provided a scaffold that facilitated the transformation and interpretation of the learned social studies content. (Right, top)

### Day 1: Reading Mentor Texts and Completing the Graphic Organizer

We introduced “I Am” Poetry by immersing students in picture books written as extended persona poems. These mentor texts provided students with literary models of the poetic form they would be composing. We asked students to write about Sumiko and Frank’s stories by interpreting the information in the organizer and then transforming those ideas into a poem. Writing innovations like these perspective recognition activities (in which students interpret, manipulate, and transform ideas) often lead to a greater understanding of the content. We began completing the graphic organizer with the students through a shared discussion. We included historical evidence (both from research and the novel) as well as Sumiko and Frank’s thoughts and actions (character attributes), especially passages that invite the reader to imagine sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes.<sup>5</sup> Students completed the graphic organizer for homework.

### Day 2: Presenting a Template for a Poem and Engaging in a Shared Writing

The second day we shared our version of the “I Am” poem template and discussed how and why we changed the verbs that were part of the stems (See the poem at the end of this article).

Notice the expansion of the stems and the emphasis on change and growth with the lines (in the third stanza) “I was once ... But now I ...” Students were encouraged to change and rearrange the stems and to freely write what they were thinking. We then modeled the process of composing the poems for each character, drafting the first three lines with students freely offering their ideas. Students witnessed how we regularly referenced the graphic organizers and then transformed the ideas to shape the poem.

To complete the shared writing, students engaged in a writ-

ten rehearsal (draft) of the poem instead of contributing their ideas orally. They focused on composing different lines of the poem that were connected to their contributions to class discussions, specific interests, and response journal entries. For example, one student continually wrote about, researched, and discussed Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066. So naturally, that student incorporated that specific content into his poetry. Once again, students were asked to review ideas from their graphic organizers and to incorporate both literary and historical understandings into their lines of poetry.

### Day 3: Individual Student Contributions

On the third day, students were pulled individually to review their poems and to locate their respective lines that would become part of the extended class poem. In essence, we chose each child’s best work: poetic lines that revealed evidence of historical understandings as well as literary understandings





**Figure 2**

Student collage  
"I Wonder Who I Dream"

that included memorable poetic language. Next, we wrote, combined, and projected their specific lines for everyone to see, and then we read the poem aloud. Beside each line of the poem, we wrote the student's name that contributed that specific line in order to give students ownership over the poem. Finally, we revised and edited the poem making necessary changes, and again, read the poem aloud...multiple times. For homework, students created an artistic impression of their respective lines—a visual art form that connected to their lines of poetry. They were given class time the following day to finish their artistic impressions.

#### Day 4: Digital Stories

On this day, we first reviewed the poem one last time making any changes the class deemed necessary. Next, students were pulled individually to read aloud their lines. We recorded the students and created audio files using the free audio editing software program Audacity.<sup>6</sup> These files were later used to create digital PowerPoint Books by inserting the audio files as well as the scanned images or digital pictures of their artistic impressions into the PowerPoint slides (FIGURE 1 and 2). Each line of the poem became a page (a slide) of the PowerPoint. The "I Am" Poems became "I Am" Books available through both a print/paper version and a digital version that could be uploaded to the class blog.

The audio recordings of students reading their lines of poetry and the digital images of their artwork were imported into movie-editing software programs, iMovie for Mac users or Windows Movie Maker for PC users, and were manipulated in order to create a movie in which each student's image was

visible for the duration of the student's audio recording of his or her line. Music was also added to the videos, but it played softly in the background so students' spoken lines were still clear and audible. After the movies were completed, we uploaded them to TeacherTube and linked them from the class blog for the wider world to view. (See for example, [http://teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video\\_id=102838&title=I\\_AM\\_SUMIKO](http://teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=102838&title=I_AM_SUMIKO).)

Students began to internalize and take ownership of the historical understandings developed through the careful reading of *Weedflower* and the collaboratively composed "I Am" poems. The insights and understandings developed around the characters enabled the students to write with emotion, vivid imagery, literary devices (simile), precise word choice, and factual information, thus revealing a creative new perspective and interpretation of the character represented in the poem. These student poets were able to include more than just factual information ... they revealed the emotional and endearing perspectives of Sumiko and Frank. Read one such poem in the right column of this page.

#### Conclusion

When we teach students how to imagine a different reality, they may perceive what is lacking, reach beyond the present, stand up for justice, and initiate change. Through this integrated language arts and social studies unit, students collaboratively composed and published "I Am" poetry. As a result, these fifth graders began to see themselves as agents of change. Finally, students were motivated and empowered to communicate their transformation of knowledge and message about social justice to a more global community. As one student said, "It kind of

made me understand her [Sumiko's] situation better cause we really got back in the book and just looked at every little detail and then the 'We Are' poem kind of made me think about how I could use the information in the book and transfer it to my own life and those little details really help you understand their situations and their characters better I think and transfer it to my life and how I could use that information in situations and make the world a better place." 🌟

#### Notes

1. A longer version of this article, which describes the longer unit of study, is available from the authors, at [fryeem@appstate.edu](mailto:fryeem@appstate.edu).
2. C. Kadohata, *Weedflower* (New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006). *Weedflower* is the recipient of the 2007 Jane Addams Children's Book Award.
3. L. Kucan, "'I' Poems: Invitations for Students to Deepen Literary Understanding," *The Reading Teacher* 60, 2007: 518–525.
4. L. Levstik, and K. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, 3d ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005).
5. One collection of historical primary sources (letters from imprisoned Japanese students to their school librarian) is discussed in "Dear Miss Breed: Using Primary Documents to Advance Student Understanding of Japanese Internment Camps" by Patrick Westcott and Martha Graham Viator, in *Social Education* 72, no. 4 (May/June 2008): 198–202.
6. [audacity.sourceforge.net](http://audacity.sourceforge.net).

**ELIZABETH M. FRYE** is an associate professor in the Department of Reading Education and Special Education at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina

**LISA A. HASH** is a second grade teacher at Vance Elementary School, Asheville, North Carolina

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Eve Bunting, *So Far from the Sea* (New York: Clarion Books, 1998).

Sheila Hamanaka, *The Journey: Japanese Americans, Racism and Renewal* (New York: Orchard Books, 1990).

Amy Lee-Tai, *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow* (San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press, 2006).

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Rick Noguchi and J. Deneen, *Flowers from Mariko* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 2001).

Joanne Oppenheim, *Dear Miss Breed: True Stories of the Japanese American Incarceration During World War II and a Librarian Who Made a Difference* (New York: Scholastic, 2006).

Gail Sakurai, *Japanese American Internment Camps: Cornerstones of Freedom* (New York: Scholastic, 2002).

Jerry Stanley, *I Am an American* (New York: Scholastic, 1998).

Michael O. Tunnell, *The Children of Topaz* (New York: Holiday House, rev. 2011).

Yoshiko Uchida, *The Bracelet* (New York: Philomel, 1993).

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Invisible Thread* (New York: J. Messner, 1991).

## I Am Sumiko

*I am a lonely Japanese American girl.*

*I cry alone on the bench pondering why I was uninvited to Marsha's party...humiliated with haji (shame).*

*I touch kusabana flowers (weedflowers) as I fragilely display them for sale at the flower market.*

*I lived in California on my Uncle's old flower farm with my extended family until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and F.D.R. issued Executive Order 9066.*

*I wonder why my family and I were forced to relocate to the Poston Arizona Internment Camp...our dirty dust-pelted jail. Forced against our will, we were herded like cattle on a warm winter day.*

*I hear that we are dangerous, wasteful and other hurtful stereotypes...unwelcome in my own country.*

*I want to return to my kusabana and smell my favorite flowers.*

*I am a lonely Japanese American girl.*

*I question the US Government's decision to move us into Internment Camps: protection or prejudice...*

*Shikata ga nai (this cannot be helped)...or can it?*

*I see dirt and sandstorms—my eyes are dried by mucous and dust.*

*I feel confused about Mojave Indians not having the right to vote in Arizona...until 1948.*

*I worry that Uncle and Jiichan will be tortured by our own people.*

*I worry if we leave, we will be discriminated against?*

*I taste the delicious fried snake with shoyu (soy sauce)—It tastes like unagi (eel).*

*I understand that "in the world of change you accept the changes that can't be helped.*

*You suffer so you can learn..."*

*I am Sumiko and I am a melancholy and confused Japanese American girl.*

*I say Frank has abandoned me, but then I conclude that friendship is complicated and requires sacrifice.*

*I believe in Japanese Americans getting their homes, land, and lives back after the war.*

*I dream of my transformation from a farm girl to a flower shop owner.*

*I try to understand and cultivate my friendship with Sachi, Mr. Moto, and Frank "Huulas" Butler.*

*One day, I hope to own my own flower shop with delicate stock, carnations, and my uncle's flowers, the future of America.*

*I was once a lonely farm girl who lived on my Uncle's flower farm and didn't know what friendship was.*

*But now I am a girl with family, friends and a future who wants to own a flower shop.*

*I am Sumiko and I am a Proud Japanese American.*