

# Dear Miss Breed: Using Primary Documents to Advance Student Understanding of Japanese Internment Camps

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**The history of the United States** includes myriad examples of courage and selflessness as well as instances of prejudice and discrimination. Many students believe that prejudice and discrimination are limited to individuals and do not realize that these can form part of government or national policy. As stated by Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode, “The institutional definition of racism is not always easy to accept because it goes against deeply held ideals of equality and justice in our nation.”<sup>1</sup>

The internment of American citizens during World War II is a case in point. However, this traumatic period is generally boiled down to three key dates for today’s students:

- December 7, 1941—Japanese airplanes attacked Pearl Harbor;
- February 19, 1942—President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066;
- August 6, 1945—U.S. dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan.

Most high school textbooks devote little more than a page to the Japanese American experience; consequently, few students understand the impact Executive Order 9066 had on the people who were interned or how it affected and continues to affect the Japanese American community. In his content analysis of six high school U.S. history textbooks, Masato Ogawa discovered that only one-half to four pages were devoted to Japanese internment. And he notes that no textbook addressed the racial prejudice and rampant anti-Japanese sentiment that existed.<sup>2</sup>

Middle school and high school students should be exposed to the tragic history of Japanese internment camps

so, as Elizabeth Kikuchi Yamada states, we “never allow any group or individuals to be deprived of their civil liberties and rights again.”<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp exemplifies the manner in which history repeats itself.

A two- to three-week inquiry study of the Japanese internment, with a focus on equality and social justice, is extremely relevant to middle and high school students, particularly in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks (often compared to the bombing of Pearl Harbor). In an inquiry study, the teacher provides enough structure to help students sustain a constructive direction, while students actively participate in exploring questions, ideas, and events.

One powerful teaching tool for the study of U.S. Japanese internment is Joanne Oppenheim’s *Dear Miss Breed*—a 2007 winner of the NCSS Carter G. Woodson Award (reviewed in this issue on p. 187), given annually for works of nonfiction that promote understanding of pluralistic values. Oppenheim recounts the stories of 19 children of Japanese ancestry who, along with their families, were interned in U.S. concentration camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The book contains correspondence to Clara Breed, the San Diego children’s librarian, from her incarcerated Japanese library patrons—in response to her own letters and care packages. The author intertwines the letters with a broader narrative, augmented by photos, archival materials, and poignant quotations from the later reparation hearings. The text contains valuable information about the camps, including a discussion of the semantic differences between incarceration and concentration camps, the location of the relocation camps, in addition to the story of Clara Breed, her young patrons, and their ongoing correspondence. Consider *Dear Miss Breed* as a touchstone to which you can return.

While it is unreasonable to expect that individual classrooms purchase multiple copies of *Dear Miss Breed*, nonfiction trade books of high quality should be used in the social studies classroom. Research has stressed the importance of context in the presentation of history, noting that trade books support student understanding beyond what could be accomplished by textbooks alone.<sup>4</sup> Linda Levstik notes the power of the narrative in relating history as a story that emphasizes the human connection to events rather than as disembodied facts. Such a view of history helps “students connect with history as they relate to people much like themselves but in another time and place.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Inquiry Study: What Does it Mean to be an American Citizen? A Study of Japanese Internment during World War II**

This two- to three-week inquiry study is designed to invite students to explore the Overarching Question of what it means to be an American citizen through an investigation of Japanese internment camps. Students will arrive at their own Big Idea Questions with preconceived notions that will be discussed, debated, and (perhaps) altered as a result of their investigations. The Big Idea Questions will be referred to continuously and reexamined throughout the unit.

### *Instructional Foci*

1. Brainstorm/K-W-L Chart
2. Inquiry Chart
3. Readings from *Dear Miss Breed* by Oppenheim
4. Research on Big Idea Question
5. Assessment (suggested scrap-book project)

## **Step One: Preparation and Planning**

When planning the unit, teachers should follow Oppenheim's lead, initiating research with a virtual visit to the Japanese American National Museum ([www.janm.org](http://www.janm.org)). The Clara Breed collection is available for review. From 1942 to 1945, Clara Breed collected the letters sent to her by the young Japanese Americans held in internment camps. Many years later, Miss Breed passed on her collection to one of the original correspondents, Elizabeth Kikuchi Yamada, who donated the letters to the Japanese American National Museum (see suggested online sources below).

The letters in *Dear Miss Breed* can serve as an impetus for an inquiry into the "big ideas" of equality and social justice. Another useful resource is the selected readings in Alice Yang Murray's *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* Murray's book includes writings by three activists in the redress movement of the 1970s



School children break for recess at a Japanese relocation camp in 1943 similar to the Poston camp where Clara Breed's library patrons were held. (Ansel Adams/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppprs-00338)

and 1980s and two researchers who reexamined wartime sources and oral history sources.<sup>6</sup>

## **Step Two: Asking the Questions**

Begin the unit with a brainstorm session using the question, "What examples of social injustice existed in U.S. history?" Slavery or the displacement of Native Americans may be immediate responses. Perhaps students will recount the plight of Chinese or Irish American laborers. (There may be the solitary student who recalls the Japanese internment camps.)

Introduce students to the subject of Japanese detention camps by asking them to reveal anything they know about the camps. We recommend developing a *What I Know/What I Want to Know/What I Learned* (K-W-L) chart that remains posted throughout the study. The chart can list whatever knowledge students shared about the incarceration of Japanese Americans; what they would like to know (which can be listed

as general questions); and the final space is reserved for answers to the questions, in addition to other information of interest to students.

Now, return to the general questions raised and ask students to consider what might be the Big Idea Questions that probe most deeply when studying Japanese American internment camps. Questions to guide the unit could be, "What is the definition of an American citizen?"; "Must Americans prove their allegiance to their country?"; or "Can a wrong ever be a right?" Big Idea Questions need not be topical. As Jamie McKenzie notes: "We should... emphasize research questions that require problem-solving or decision-making, questions that cause students to make up their own minds and fashion their own answers."<sup>7</sup>

## **Step Three: Charting the Inquiry**

Teachers may find it helpful to create a chart similar to the one below for the study. The first column represents the

Figure. 1

General Questions students may raise		Big Idea Questions	Big Ideas (NCSS)	Selected References in <i>Dear Miss Breed</i>
1.	Why were they interned?	Was the decision based on national security, racism, or economic considerations?	NCSS 6: How can individual rights be protected within the context of majority rule?	pp. 24–40, 147–148
2.	Who was interned? All or some? Who decided and how?	Why were some members of the group not evacuated? What criteria were used to decide?  Must Americans prove their allegiance to their country?	NCSS 6: How can individual rights be protected within the context of majority rule?  NCSS 10: How has the meaning of citizenship evolved?  NCSS 10: What is the role of the citizen in the community and the nation, and as a member of the world community?	pp. 41–47, 204, 212–213, 241
3.	Did anyone oppose sending people to camps?	Does opposing the government in times of war make you a traitor?	NCSS 10: What is the balance between rights and responsibilities?  NCSS 10: Can an individual make a difference?	pp. 33–34, 92–93, 174–177
4.	What happened to the things they left behind?	Is it fair to take advantage of someone who must sell his belongings?	NCSS 6: How can individual rights be protected within the context of majority rule?	pp. 47–52
5.	What did they do in the camps?	Did the U.S. government provide adequate living conditions, education, and work?	NCSS 6: What is legitimate authority?	pp. 121–138
6.	How long were they there?	Can the government force an individual to work or serve his country against his will?	NCSS 6: How can individual rights be protected within the context of majority rule?	pp. 187–193, 223–228
7.	How did they feel about being in the camps?	What does it mean to be deprived of your rights as a citizen?	NCSS 6: What is power? What forms does it take? Who holds it?	pp. 72–74, 82, 86, 93, 98, 115, 119
8.	How did it change them and their lives?	Should a person change her cultural identity to fit in?	NCSS 2: Who am I? What happened in the past? How am I connected to those in the past?	pp. 122–124, 167, 187

general questions students raise about the internment. The general questions are then folded into a Big Idea Question that probes students' thinking and progress beyond definitive answers. The third column links the questions to the Big Ideas noted in the National Council for the Social Studies standards. Finally, the fourth column notes specific references in Oppenheim's text to the questions and Big Ideas.

#### Step Four: Guiding the Inquiry

In organizing the study, we recommend dividing students into small research teams based on a self-selected Big Idea Question to investigate. They can then use the general questions that were generated in class or generate additional questions to begin their research. For

example, let's use the Big Idea Question, "Must Americans prove their allegiance to their country?" General questions that emerge could be "What did the Japanese Americans do after Pearl Harbor to demonstrate their loyalty?"; "How did the federal government ask its citizens to show their loyalty?"; "Why were Japanese Americans made to demonstrate their loyalty while other citizens were not asked to do so?"; "How did the media portray Japanese Americans?" Preparatory time must be spent on raising the questions, but questions may be revised and edited as the young researchers gain more information.

As the students immerse themselves in research, the Big Idea Questions may be transformed based on uncovered information. This is the nature of inquiry

study. The path that seemed so clear now veers away from the initial Big Idea Questions. It is important to give students sufficient time for research as they seek to answer their Big Idea Question. Where to begin? Access to computers and the vast library of resources on the Internet is essential. Teachers can help students avoid hours of surfing for information. Bookmarking essential sites is helpful. Some suggested sites (viable as of publication time) include:

- The entire collection of letters to Miss Breed, both in original and transcription form at the Japanese American National Museum: [www.janm.org/exhibits/breed/title.htm](http://www.janm.org/exhibits/breed/title.htm).

Figure 2.

	Exemplary	Accomplished	Developing	Beginning
Big Idea Question	Big Idea Question clearly evident. Explored the Question from the perspective of the internee and provided an explanation appropriate for that particular person	Explored a Big Idea Question, but the perspective of the internee is not always evident. Provided an explanation but not appropriate for that particular person	Big Idea Question raised but not explored or not answered adequately	Failed to include the following: Big Idea Question; Exploration of issues; Perspective of internee; Answer based on internee's character
Historical Accuracy	Entire scrapbook reflects application of historical knowledge based on primary sources	Most of the scrapbook reflects application of historical knowledge based on primary sources	Little in the scrapbook reflects application of historical knowledge; used few primary sources	Nothing in scrapbook is historically accurate; failed to use primary sources
Pictures and Graphics	Includes photographs and drawings (4+ of each)	Includes photographs and drawings (3 of each)	Includes photographs and drawings (2 of each)	Includes no photographs or drawings
Collaboration	Strong evidence (from daily self/group assessment) of effective collaboration with other group members	Evidence (from daily self/group assessment) of some collaboration with other group members	Little evidence (from daily self/group assessment) of collaboration with other group members	No evidence (from daily self/group assessment) of collaboration with other group members
Self Evaluation & Work Ethic	Evaluation reflects thought and truthfulness and student worked hard and was on task each day	Lacking in one: Thoughtful & truthful evaluation Worked hard On task each day	Lacking in two: Thoughtful & truthful evaluation Worked hard On task each day	Lacking in all three: Thoughtful & truthful evaluation Worked hard On task each day

- A book published by the National Park Service includes a chapter with photographs of the Poston War Relocation Camp; *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*, [www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/anthropology74/ce10.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/anthropology74/ce10.htm).
- The Online Archive of California has a large collection of photographs, divided into series by individual camps, including Poston, at [oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf596nb4h0](http://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf596nb4h0).
- The San Francisco Museum houses a significant collection of newspaper articles from *San Francisco News* (March – April 1942) in addition to photographs and reports regarding internment at [www.sfmuseum.org/war/evactxt.html](http://www.sfmuseum.org/war/evactxt.html).
- The National Archives contains a number of resources, primarily photographs (this requires search

skills): [www.archives.gov/research/arc/topics/japanese-americans/](http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/topics/japanese-americans/).

- A three-minute trailer for a documentary entitled “Passing Poston: An American Story” can be viewed at [www.passingposton.com/trailer.php](http://www.passingposton.com/trailer.php).
- An exhibit of photographs from two camps, Tule and Topaz can be found at “Japanese Americans Internment Camps During World War II” from the Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, and Private Collections: [www.lib.utah.edu/spc/photo/9066/9066.htm](http://www.lib.utah.edu/spc/photo/9066/9066.htm).
- The Library of Congress American Memory Collection has Photographs of Manzanar War Relocation Center taken by Ansel Adams in 1943, [lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/collections/anseladams/](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/collections/anseladams/).
- The Harry S. Truman Library and Museum has photographs, oral histories, and letters by the president

at [www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/japanese\\_internment/background.htm](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/japanese_internment/background.htm).

- For official government documents, see the Avalon Project of the Yale Law School at [www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm).

It is also important to check at the state level for resources. For example, in New Jersey, where we teach, the *Core Curriculum Content Standards* note that Seabrook Farms, a producer of frozen vegetables, served as a site for Japanese workers during the relocation period.<sup>8</sup>

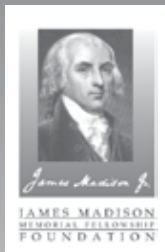
### Step Five: Assessment

Effective assessments should address three areas: intent, self-assessment, and the artifact.<sup>9</sup> (1) Intent: students should be able answer the Overarching Question; (2) Self-Assessment: students should be able to self-reflect in two ways. One is on the individual’s contribution to the group’s product, and the other is on how well the group worked as a unit;

(3) Artifact: should be meaningful, make history come alive, and allow students to take ownership of the material. This may be accomplished through a variety of projects, such as crafting drama or artwork. One possible project is a Japanese Internment Scrapbook; as described below, the scrapbook provides students with the opportunity to internalize the experiences, emotions, and thoughts of the interned children. In essence, the project revisits the Overarching Question: What does it mean to be a U.S. citizen?

### Description and Rubric for Sample Project: Japanese Internment Scrapbook

For this assignment, each group will assume the role of one of the following internees whose correspondence is included in *Dear Miss Breed*: Elizabeth Kikuchi, Louise Ogawa, Fusa Tsumagari, Katherine Tasaki, Tsuzo Hirasaki, Jack Watanabe, William Watanabe, or Margaret Ishino.



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Each group will address the Overarching Question (What does it mean to be a U.S. citizen?) by

- Answering a self-selected Big Idea Question from the perspective of the internee.
- Creating a scrapbook illustrating the experiences that contributed to the development of that person's perspective; in other words, analyzing why the child would answer the Big Idea Question that way.

Instruct each group to

- Determine a Big Idea Question to investigate;
- Brainstorm a list of general questions that arise from the Big Idea Question;
- Read all the letters written by internee to understand the character;
- Identify other letters, photographs, newspaper articles that will provide context for the events, the conditions, the world in which the youth lived;
- Assume the identify of the internee and create a scrapbook that illustrates how he or she felt about the chosen issue and ultimately how he or she would answer the question.

Conducting the project in class allows teachers to provide guidance when needed, observe each group's level of collaboration, and monitor progress. Each group should establish benchmarks to help periodically self-assess each member's progress. This provides both teacher and student with evidence to assess the categories of **Collaboration** and **Self Evaluation & Work Ethic** in the sample rubric below.

Using Oppenheim's *Dear Miss Breed* as the resource to launch an

inquiry study will help students empathize with children of the internment camps. Through the study of primary documents, students will progress beyond their cultural confines to an enhanced understanding of a tragic moment in our history. 📖

### Notes

1. Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2008), 69.
2. Masato Ogawa, "The Treatment of Japanese-American Internment during World War II in United States History Textbooks," *International Journal of Social Education* 19, no. 1 (2004): 40.
3. Joanne Oppenheim, *Dear Miss Breed* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 5.
4. Linda S. Levstik and Evelyn B. Freeman, "Recreating the Past: Historical Fiction in the Social Studies Curriculum," *Elementary School Journal* 88, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 329-337; Bernice E. Cullinan, Kathy T. Harwood, and S. Lee Galda as cited in Carol J. Fuhler, "Add Spark and Sizzle to Middle School Social Studies: Use Trade Books to Enhance Instruction," *Social Studies* 82, no. 6 (1991): 234-238.
5. Levstik, "Coming to Terms with History: Historical Narrativity and the Young Reader," *Theory into Practice* 28, no. 2 (1989): 114-119.
6. Alice Yang Murray, *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000).
7. Jamie McKenzie, *Beyond Technology: Questioning, Research and the Information Literate School* (Bellingham, Wash.: FNO Press, 2000), 67.
8. New Jersey Department of Education, "Core Curriculum Content Standards: Social Studies" (October 2004).
9. K. Short and C. Burke, *Creating Curriculum* (Portsmouth, N.H.: 1991), 62.

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