

Chapter 1

Native American Issues in Early Childhood Education

Guy's Perspective

For some, knowledge is sorrow. I have a story I'd like to share with the hope that someone can understand the frustration of living in a world not of my own making. As a young boy living on the Standing Rock Reservation, just starting what so many refer to as a formal education, I remember feeling confused from the beginning. Every morning we would start the day with the Pledge of Allegiance and a word of prayer. Following the prayer, we would begin our Bible study. There is one preacher I remember the most, not because of his message or persona, but because of the way he would start his teaching. Every morning he read from the same book and chapter of the Bible to remind us why we were there. I would think to myself, "He really likes this verse."

For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 1:18

We were not to worry, he always told us, because he was there to give us the truth and keep us from grief and sorrow. He would caution us not to seek knowledge, but to let him and the teachers guide us to a better life. Back then, we

didn't have the mind to question or even challenge what was being told to us. Still, there are times when I'd like to go back and ask him what happened to those better times we were promised. Indian people on and off the reservation still live in poverty, with despair and suicide rampant among the young.

Today, people say to me, "Don't worry—those days of having another culture's religion imposed in school will never happen again; there are laws now to keep that from happening." As they speak to me, I remember an incident involving my youngest son when he was in kindergarten in a Midwestern, urban school. His teacher held up a sheet of paper and asked him, "What color is this?"

"It's the color of the sky," he answered.

"Wrong," she responded. Holding up another sheet of paper, she asked again, "What color is this?"

"It's the color of the leaves and grass," he answered.

"Wrong," she told him again.

No, she wasn't quoting from scriptures like the teachers I had, but she was still controlling his thinking. He had responded in accord with his Native teachings, to draw relationships to the natural world he was tied to. When he didn't give her the answer she was seeking, she essentially told him that not only was he wrong, but his traditional teachings were also wrong. So I am still concerned about the educational system today.



Sally's Perspective

Steven and Josh were busy working in the art area of the classroom. They had assembled paper, scissors, markers, tape, and glue. As I came over to watch whatever elaborate project they were working on, Josh looked up and informed me that he was making guns. Indeed, he had already assembled two realistic-looking holsters. I decided to probe a bit and asked him why he was making guns.

"I'm a cowboy," he told me. "That's why I'm making guns."

"Why does a cowboy need guns?" I asked him.

Josh thought for a long time. Then he shrugged and said, "I don't know."

His friend Steven, though, seated across the table, knew. Right away he spoke up and said, "A cowboy needs guns so he can kill Indians."

"Why would a cowboy want to do that?" I asked.

“Because Indians are bad,” Steven confidently informed me. “Indians kill people. They’ll scalp you.”

Here I sat with a group of four-year-olds who harbored the same terrible fears and misconceptions as my own generation four decades earlier. What is a teacher to do to counter such blatant racism? Where do children come up with these images and notions? Why aren’t we doing more in our classrooms to counter stereotypes and help children understand similarities and differences among peoples? I, too, have concerns about our educational system today.

Why a Book about Native American Issues?

In light of current discussions about embracing diversity in early childhood classrooms, the question could certainly be asked, “Why not a book about diversity in general?” After all, many teachers are trying to move away from isolating groups of people or cultures as topics of study, and most teachers certainly believe that books and curriculum materials about many diverse groups of people should be incorporated into the classroom throughout the year, in all units of study, and across the curriculum. So why isolate Native Americans as a topic for discussion?

There are two critical reasons for focusing on Native American issues in education. The first is the blatant bias with regard to Native peoples that continues to thrive throughout our schools. Long after “Little Black Sambo” images, which are so degrading to African Americans, have been removed from classrooms, we still see blatant stereotyping of American Indian peoples deeply embedded in school culture and curriculum. For example, class dictionaries show degrading images of “Indians” and “Eskimos,” and textbooks still contain excerpts from authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, who speaks of “marauding savages.” Books and materials for young people mix up and misrepresent Native American Nations, as if they were all one culture, and depict Native peoples as primitive or living only in the past. Meanwhile, our mass media bombards children with cartoons and old westerns, complete with savage images of “wild Indians,” while beloved sports teams, many actually representing schools, turn Native peoples into caricatures and mascots. For the sake of all our children, teachers and schools absolutely must acknowledge and begin to rectify these huge problems.

There is a second reason for focusing on the topic of Native American issues in education. By delving more deeply into particular cultures, we can begin to better understand true issues of diversity in general. In looking at the problems so blatantly confronting one group in our educational practices, we can begin to see similar issues among other groups. As teachers, when we learn more about specific cultures, we learn to ask the right questions. For example, if symbols used in American Indian ceremonies are sacred, and Indian people therefore ask us not to incorporate them into art projects with children, are symbols used in some African ceremonies also sacred? Hadn't we better ask? As we learn to ask questions, we also discover where to go for answers. We begin to realize that many of the materials marketed to teachers are not written by individuals from the cultures they attempt to represent. As awareness rises, teachers learn to look more closely at what we teach and what resources we use. Teachers truly need more in-depth information about all cultures. Exploring the issues faced by one group sensitizes us to issues that affect us all.



Guy's Perspective

Recently I ran into a woman I know from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. She's an educated woman, a banker, who has lived in Dayton for some time. She said to me, "I just don't think I can take living here much longer. How do you do it? How do you take the endless stupid comments and questions and never get mad? You must be much more patient than I am. Sometimes I think if one more person asks me if I live in a tipi, I'll just lose it."

My response to her was that I'm not patient, and I do get mad, but you have to think about who it is you're angry with. Otherwise, you're just mad all the time. I told her that you shouldn't get mad at a person who asks you if you live in a tipi because that person is asking you for information. The reason people ask is that they were taught wrong information from teachers. But you can't get mad at their teachers, because they were also taught by teachers, and those teachers were taught misinformation from books. So it goes, on and on.

I told her, "You have to talk to people who ask you if you still live in a tipi. Tell them about your house, because if you change the thinking of just one person,

that person will tell another person, and another, and another. You have to do that for the sake of your two boys.”

I involve myself with my son’s education every step of the way. When he brings his books home each year, I read them. Then I go up to the school and ask the teacher to look at those books. I look at everything. I look at the social studies books. I look at the history books. I look at the health books. I look at all of those things because it is vitally important that the teachers realize that my child is American Indian, and there is a lot of wrong information about Indian people in those books. They need to understand that. For example, the food pyramid in the health books is upside down for Indian people. If we Indian people turn the food pyramid back the other way, more like our traditional diets, we can get rid of much of the diabetes that Indian people now have. When we try to eat like non-Indians, we end up with diabetes.

I believe that as Indian people, we need to involve ourselves with our children’s education so that when our children grow up and their children are in school, they don’t have to deal with the same issues that we live with. There will be a day when non-Indian children stop asking them if they live in tipis. Reeducating people has to begin today. We need to start telling our story.



Sally’s Perspective

I have taught preschool and kindergarten children from diverse cultures for twenty-five years, and for the first fifteen years I had no awareness at all of Native American issues in education. While I have always valued multicultural education, for many years I limited curriculum materials to the cultures represented by the children in my classroom: African American, European American, African, and numerous Asian cultures, including Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Cambodian, Thai, Filipino, Indian, and Indonesian. To me, this approach seemed concrete, real, relevant, and inclusive. Since so much diversity was already present among the children in the program and within the classroom curriculum, I never thought about groups that were not represented, such as Native American or Latino cultures.

I can pinpoint the exact moment when my views about multicultural education changed. I was at a national conference in Denver in 1991 when I happened to wander into a museum where I encountered a time line of the history of the United States

that was completely new to me. I read about massacres of Indian people at places like Washita, Sand Creek, and Blue Water. I heard about the destruction of cultures and learned of children taken forever from their families. I was shocked. I consider myself to be a relatively well-educated person, but I had never heard any of this. It was as if every book, teacher, and course I had ever encountered suffered from collective amnesia.

Aghast at my own ignorance, I bought a book about Native American history and read it on the airplane on the way home. Then I bought another book, and another, and another. Eventually, I asked myself what now seems an incredibly ignorant question. Where are Native American people today? Are there any Native American people still in Ohio? After all, I had grown up in northern Ohio looking for arrowheads at state parks and hearing names of towns or schools such as Shawnee, Ottawa, and Miami. Still, I had never met a person who was Shawnee, Ottawa, or Miami, at least as far as I knew. I began to find tidbits in the newspaper about local Native American groups. I visited all of them. Many turned out to be run by European Americans who did not seem to represent authentic Native cultures. Indian people sometimes refer to such folks as “wannabees.” Then I attended my first powwow, which was run by a group called the Miami Valley Council for Native Americans, and saw dancers, artists, vendors, and families from many Native nations. I heard music and saw dancing unlike any I had seen before. For me, this was the beginning of listening to Native people talk about their own cultures and learning from them.

In time, I began to explore how to translate this new knowledge into an effective curriculum in the classroom. I found books, recordings, and artwork to share with children, and I began to listen more carefully to the comments they made. Clearly, they had many preconceived ideas of Native American peoples, and their images were not positive ones. I found that in order to help children and be more effective as a teacher, I had to use diversity curriculum more skillfully, not as a didactic tool, but as a means to present positive and accurate images to counter the children’s inaccurate ones. Ultimately, I began to collaborate with Native educators to help raise the awareness and understanding of other teachers.

At first, I clearly made some poor choices of materials to use in the classroom. I sometimes selected books written by non-Native authors that did not accurately portray Native cultures. Life is a path of learning for all of us, and in time I found much better resources and learned how to better evaluate curriculum materials. As I watched the responses of

the children change as they were exposed to more and more images of Native peoples in the world today, I became convinced that teachers must introduce children to high-quality books and materials from many cultures. This is a critical means to broaden their perspectives and counter the many stereotypes that still exist in society. The children we teach today are growing up in a multicultural world. We must not miss the opportunity we have to help them regard all people positively.

Problems in Today's Classrooms

The educational community has yet to deal with problems related to how Native American cultures and peoples are represented, or omitted, from the curriculum in our schools. While interest in multicultural education continues, issues such as the blatant stereotyping of Native peoples within schools, and their almost total exclusion from curriculum materials, do not even make it to the table to be discussed. Several years ago, when Sally asked her son's literature teacher if her class would be reading any material written by Native American authors, the teacher replied that there were no Native American authors! A social studies teacher volunteered that the students would gain an Indian perspective when they read Chief Seattle's speech (given in 1854). Since the class was currently studying the French and Indian War (1754–63), it would seem that the teacher either was unaware of the involvement of American Indians in that conflict or felt their contribution to history was too insignificant to invite study until the middle part of the nineteenth century. If our teachers remain so ignorant about the role of Native peoples in the entire history of our country, how will non-Native children gain any perspective on the problems that remain to this day?

Problems related to the portrayal of Native American peoples also abound within the early childhood field. While teachers may pay some attention to including African American curriculum materials in their classrooms, little or no thought is given to Native cultures. We have identified four areas of concern with current practices in the early childhood field:

1. Omission of Native American materials from the curriculum
2. Inaccurate portrayals or information in the curriculum
3. Stereotyping of Native American peoples
4. Cultural insensitivity

While the initial reaction of teachers is often that these problems don't exist in their classrooms, as they look closer, teachers typically find that they do. By examining each of these areas of concern, teachers can begin to look more deeply at their own programs and assess aspects that can be changed or improved.

Omission from Curriculum

American Indian peoples are typically ignored in early childhood programs. There are no books, dolls, pictures, puzzles, or other curriculum materials that represent contemporary Native peoples available in most classrooms. When books do find their way into programs, they are often generic, depicting Native American peoples as monocultural rather than as representing hundreds of distinct societies. Such books typically portray Indian people as living only in the past, where children bearing made-up names, such as Little Bear or Indian Two Feet, run around in buckskin vests.

Teachers may not regard omission of Native American images from the curriculum as a problem. After all, the argument sometimes goes, there aren't any Native American children in our school anyway. Teachers out West can worry about including American Indian materials in their classrooms. There are two responses to that argument. The first is that we often don't fully know the backgrounds of the children we teach. While Native peoples live throughout the country, they often don't draw attention to themselves. Sally used to remark that she had never taught any children of Native descent. Then she met a little girl from her class at a powwow. There she was with her fringed shawl, dancing, and she proudly introduced her Cherokee grandfather.

A second point to ponder is that the children we teach today will grow up to live and work in a multiethnic society, one that includes Native American peoples from many diverse cultures. The omission of Native cultures from the curriculum, coupled with generic representations of Native American peoples, leads non-Native children to assume that Indian people don't exist today and had no role in the history of this country. Lack of knowledge leaves children vulnerable to the stereotypical images that they are sure to encounter.

Inaccurate Curriculum

Another problem in the early childhood field is inaccurate curriculum materials related to Native American peoples. Since teachers may lack the background to adequately evaluate materials, they often make inappropriate selections. This leads to misinformation and stereotyping. Later, non-Native children may have difficulties relating to Native American peoples because they lack an accurate historical and cultural perspective. This lack of understanding is clearly evident on some high school and college campuses today, where American Indian students and families protest the misuse of cultural symbols and the stereotyping of Native peoples as mascots, while many non-Native students and alumni claim they are honoring them.

Inaccurate curriculum finds its way into early childhood classrooms via two routes:

1. Curriculum materials written and produced by non-Native people who purport to represent Native cultures, but are not able to do so authentically
2. Societal traditions that perpetuate myths and inaccuracies with regard to Native peoples

Children's literature offers numerous examples of books with Native American characters and story lines written by non-Native authors. Some of these books are written by prominent authors and circulate widely. This is a problem. Non-Native authors frequently misrepresent cultural traditions, and characters may behave in a manner inconsistent with their tribal culture. For example, reviewers Slapin and Seale (Santee/Cree) note the following in *Annie and the Old One* (Miles 1971):

The traditional dress is not accurate: the hair styles are wrong, the moccasins are wrong. The blanket designs are wrong, the design of the weaving on the loom is not Navajo—or even “Indian.” The design on the pot is not authentic. (1998, 42)

Authenticity is important. Europeans and European Americans realize that Europe is composed of many different nationalities and cultures. Therefore, readers would not accept a book about an Italian man described as wearing a Scottish kilt (unless the character was experiencing a huge identity crisis!). Teachers must demand a comparable degree of authenticity in books about Native peoples; otherwise, we perpetuate the myth that all Indians are

essentially the same rather than members of more than 500 distinct Nations. Chapter 8 includes a more detailed discussion of problematic children's books.

Curriculum guides with suggestions for "Native American activities" abound. By selecting and isolating a particular art tradition, item of apparel, or celebration, they encourage non-Native children to view Indians as exotic and different, rather than helping children understand similarities among all peoples. Worse yet, they often ask children to reproduce sacred objects, thereby degrading and mocking important cultural and spiritual traditions. Several of these activity books are discussed in more detail in chapter 8.

A further way in which inaccurate information is transmitted in schools, year after year, is through societal traditions, most notably Thanksgiving and Columbus Day celebrations. These two days have become firmly established traditions in classrooms across the country. Not only are children fed untrue or sanitized information, but also they are often encouraged to act out scenarios that probably never happened. A focus on holidays is often referred to in multicultural education as a "tourist curriculum." Classrooms look at an ethnic or cultural group for a brief period each year, usually related to a particular holiday, before returning to a largely European American curriculum. The focus is on exotic differences rather than commonalities among peoples. In a tourist-type approach, Native peoples are highlighted during the Thanksgiving season and are largely forgotten thereafter. Other racial or cultural groups get their turn later, with African Americans "studied" during February, Asian Americans around the time of Chinese New Year, and Latino groups during early May, or on Cinco de Mayo.

There are, of course, numerous problems with this approach to diversity in education, but let's focus on the specifics of Thanksgiving and Columbus Day, since they are the two days that heavily affect Native peoples. Children are taught, year after year, that on Thanksgiving Pilgrims and Indians had a wonderful feast together in peaceful harmony. The truth is, 90 percent of the Native population of Massachusetts died of disease within a few years of encounter with Europeans (Loewen 1996, 80). Pilgrims stole their seed grain, robbed their graves, and exterminated entire villages. In one encounter, 600 Pequots, mostly unarmed women and children, were burned alive when their village was torched (Zinn 1990, 14–15). Thus, for many Native American peoples, Thanksgiving is a day of mourning—for the extermination of peoples,

the wholesale theft of lands, the loss of cultures and languages, and the long spiral of grief and despair.

In light of this more complete picture of Thanksgiving, isn't it amazing that we continue to perpetuate the myth of harmony and understanding? In classrooms all around the country, kindergarten teachers dutifully dress children as Pilgrims or Indians, complete with construction paper hats or feathered headbands, for the annual school play. In addition to imbedding inaccuracies firmly in children's minds, this gives them the impression that they can become Indians by dressing up in what is deemed Indian attire. Would teachers dream of dressing up children in blackface for Martin Luther King Day? These annual rites, intended or not, are a mockery of Native peoples and must stop.

While explaining the real history of Thanksgiving might be too graphic and frightening for young children, inaccurate legends can be replaced with new traditions. When Guy asked his Lakota elders for advice to share with teachers, they explained that the idea of giving thanks is part of the traditions of Native peoples. Teachers should focus on the concept of feeling thankful for what we have, they advised, and also emphasize the coming together of families to celebrate unity. It is the view of these elders that the stereotypical trappings of the Thanksgiving holiday, such as the Pilgrims and Indians, should be dropped from the curriculum. Teachers must think about these ideas and decide how they can make meaningful changes in their own classrooms. Some teachers use Thanksgiving as an opportunity to share a class feast. Families contribute favorite foods to share together, and all cultures are celebrated.

Columbus Day is another holiday that grossly distorts history, leaving Christopher Columbus as a mythic hero and ignoring the mass extermination of the Arawak people, their enslavement, the theft of their lands, and the colossal brutality of Columbus and his men. As an example, Arawak people who did not fulfill their quota of gold tribute to the Spaniards had their hands chopped off and many bled to death. In only two years after the arrival of Columbus, half of the Arawak population was dead, and a report from 1650 shows no Arawaks or their descendents left on Haiti (Zinn 1990, 4–5).

Once again we are left with a history that many teachers feel is too gruesome to share with young children. However, this does not mean we need to lie to them. Teachers from middle school through high school and college

must begin to present a complete picture of Columbus to their students. Lakota elders emphasize that teachers must be blatantly truthful about Columbus. To do otherwise tells children that it is okay to lie, as long as it is the right lie. Columbus Day is one holiday that these elders would like to see vanish. In the meantime, teachers of younger children can stop reading untruthful stories about Columbus to their classes and instead focus on integrating materials about Native peoples of today into their classrooms. This is better from a developmental standpoint anyway, since young children learn best when material is concrete, real, and relevant (Bredekamp and Copple 1997, 126).

Stereotyping

Many young children already hold stereotypical beliefs about Native American peoples. In a study published by the League of Women Voters in New Brighton, Minnesota, over three-fourths of the kindergarten children gave at least some stereotypical answers to questions regarding Native Americans (Hirschfelder 1999, 3–8). While stereotyping of American Indian peoples is widespread in the media, many materials used in schools also present stereotypical images, and teachers may not have the awareness to adequately screen for these misrepresentations. Such images can creep insidiously into the classroom, perhaps in a class dictionary that depicts a buffoonish “Eskimo” (Eastman 1964, 30) or on a butter container with a picture of an “Indian princess,” placed innocuously in the dramatic play area.

The following list describes some of the many stereotypes associated with American Indian peoples. While some of the books listed as examples have been around for decades, they are still widely available in school and public libraries, and many are still sold in bookstores. Some of the examples are very recent publications.

§ Skin Color and Appearance

Indian peoples are usually referred to as “red,” but like all racial groups, their skin colors are varying tones of brown. In addition to being inaccurate, referring to Native peoples as “red” lumps them all together. The skin tone of American Indians varies from Nation to Nation and among individuals, just as with other groups of people. Use of the term “red” when referring to Native peoples feeds into even more derogatory terminology,

such as “Redskin.” Redskin is an extremely offensive term. It refers to the bounty historically paid by Europeans for the skins of American Indians (Bigelow and Peterson 1998, 58–59).

§ *Language*

Stereotypes of Native American languages involve use of terms such as “how” and “ugh,” war whoops, and broken-English language structures. For example, in the well-known *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks 1980, 20), the Indian continually speaks in broken English, such as, “I better. You not better. You still big. You stop eat. Get right size.” All of these language stereotypes are extremely offensive and perpetuate the idea that Native peoples are uncivilized, all speak the same language, and don’t have highly developed languages. Native peoples speak hundreds of different languages.

§ *Homes*

Non-Native children often believe that all American Indian people live in tipis. There is a reason for this erroneous idea. Books, cartoons, and movies typically show all Native peoples living in the past, most often in the tipi, the traditional abode of the plains Nations. For example, *What Can You Do with a Pocket?* (Merriam 1964) shows generic Indians in front of tipis. Some teachers try to counter this by studying the historic abodes of various Native Nations. Few teachers or books, however, show the homes of Native peoples today. Books such as *A House Is a House for Me* (Hoberman 1978), still being sold in bookstores as of this writing, continue to lock Native peoples in houses of the past:

An igloo’s a house for an Eskimo.

A tepee’s a house for a Cree.

A pueblo’s a house for a Hopi.

And a wigwam may hold a Mohee.

This stanza is clearly an attempt on the author’s part to reflect the diversity of Native Nations, and perhaps to counter the prevalent image that all Native peoples traditionally lived in tipis. However, the attempt is flawed because the author portrays Native peoples in the past and not in the present. *A House Is a House for Me* is a clear example of how a well-meant effort to diversify curriculum can go badly astray if all the factors are not considered.

§ Dress

Once again stereotypes transform all Native American people into members of plains Nations, wearing feathered headdresses as part of their normal attire. Many children's books depict Native peoples in this fashion, while others show children or adults dressing up as generic Indians. Some examples are *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman 1991), in which a young girl dressed up as Hiawatha (Iroquois) sits cross-legged in a stoic pose and wears a full plains headdress; *My First Word Book* (Wilkes 1991), which shows a child dressed as a "chief" in a generic Indian "costume" complete with headdress; *I Like You* (Warburg 1965 and 1993), which shows a child dressed in stereotypical braids, buckskin dress, headband, and feather; the Rugrats book *Be My Valentine* (Wigand 2000), in which an adult dresses in a headband and feather for a Valentine's Day party; *The Golden Picture Dictionary* (Ogle and Thoburn 1976), which includes a white child dressed up as an Indian and Indian characters attacking a fort; *What Do You Do, Dear?* (Joslin 1961), which asks the reader what you should do if you are an Indian smoking a peace pipe with cowboys, and you swallow some smoke; and *If It Weren't for You* (Zolotow 1966), in which the younger child is dressed as an Indian throughout the book. Unfortunately, the list could go on and on.

§ Warlike

Many young children already view Native Americans as warlike, dangerous, and hostile. The authors of the New Brighton study, which was previously cited, were surprised at the large number of kindergarten children who described American Indians as violent and mean, killing and shooting people (Hirschfelder 1999, 4). Recently, Guy was approached by a young girl who asked, "You're not going to scalp me, are you?" This image of Native American peoples is not surprising given the violent images so often portrayed in movies, in cartoons, and by sports teams who use Indians as mascots, inspiring stadiums full of fans to perform tomahawk chops. Many children's books also depict a warlike image of Native peoples. Sometimes the images are in the background, as is the case in *Will I Have a Friend?* (Cohen 1967), in which a child dressed as an Indian runs around with a tomahawk, hand to mouth in a war whoop, throughout the book. In a book for older children, the "Indian" in *The Indian in the Cupboard* tells Omri, the child character, "Little Bear fight like mountain lion! Take

many scalps!” (Banks 1980, 29) While *The Indian in the Cupboard* is a chapter book, some older primary-age children can read it, and it has been made into a movie. Children notice these images, and they leave behind a bias that is hard to erase.

§ *Living in the Past*

Another prevalent stereotype of Native peoples is that they lived only in the past. When asked to describe Indian people today, many young children list historical occupations, dwellings, and attire. In other words, they believe that modern-day Indians wear buckskin, shoot bows and arrows, and live in tipis. In the New Brighton study, 69 percent of the kindergartners and 77 percent of the fifth-grade children gave only traditional activities when describing occupations of male Indians (Hirschfelder 1999, 4). Teachers reinforce these misconceptions when they focus their curriculum on Indian dwellings of the past, ask Native guests to come to class dressed in historical attire, or introduce arts and crafts projects that require children to recreate historical Indian dwellings or clothing. Books also reinforce these images. *My First Picture Dictionary* (1990, 179) defines the word *Indian* in past tense and uses a historic picture of Chief Joseph for the illustration: “Indian—a person from any of the groups of people who first lived in America. Indians lived here long before the coming of white people from Europe.”

§ *Culture*

Non-Native children typically lump all Native peoples together under one culture. This is not surprising since so many books, toys, television shows, and movies do the same thing. This clumping together of cultures in children’s minds was evident when a diverse group of American Indians, while on a historic Walk for Justice (1994) across the country, camped in a park in Cincinnati. Several young European American boys approached a Lakota man seated in a lawn chair and asked him to get up and do a rain dance. After politely telling them that he didn’t do rain dances, he invited them to show him one of their own dances. In addition to creating generic Indian cultures, non-Native writers often add European elements to them. For example, the back cover description of the beginning reader *The True Story of Pocahontas* (Penner 1994) proclaims, “Pocahontas was a brave, beautiful Indian princess.” European cultures had princesses; Native cultures did not.

§ Music

Hollywood has created stereotypes of American Indian music, along with stereotypes of demeanor, mannerisms, and dress. A typical example of stereotyped music is the fake war chant used by fans of the National League baseball team in Atlanta, students at Florida State University, and others. Rhythmic stereotypes also abound. One often hears a pattern of four beats, with the first heavily accented: “DUM dum dum dum, DUM dum dum dum.” None of these stereotypes is heard in the music of any Native cultures; nevertheless, they make their way into “Indian” songs for children. For example, in Silver Burdett’s *Making Music Your Own* (1971), a music series that was adopted by many schools and is still available in libraries, a song in the kindergarten volume titled “Playing Indians” (p. 75) contains stereotypes in both the melody and words:

*Playing Indians is such fun / Let’s be Indians now ...
Did you ever see a Sioux / Ride across the plain ...
Did you ever see a Crow / Paddling a canoe ...
Navahos sit in the sun, / Making bowls of clay ...
Let’s pretend we’re Iroquois, / Shooting with our bows ...
Hi-yah! Hi-yah! Hi-yah! Hi-yah! Hi-yah! Hi-yah! Hi!*

One of the problems with school music series is that the editors tend to select one or two allegedly traditional “Native American” songs, often without any apparent consultation from the cultures the songs supposedly represent, and use them as representatives of Native American music. This presents children with an extremely narrow and often inauthentic perspective about Native music. In actuality, American Indian music is extensive, extremely diverse, and continually evolving in the contemporary world, as is the music of most cultures. Some curious anomalies appear in these series. For example, the supposed Hopi “Butterfly Dance” in the kindergarten volume of the Macmillan series *The Spectrum of Music* (1980, 27) has exactly the same melody, with the exception of the last note, as the alleged Hopi “Grinding Corn” song in the first-grade volume of the Silver Burdett and Ginn series *World of Music* (1988, 126), yet the words are completely different. In some music books the only Indian songs that are included are those with vocables (syllables with no apparent meaning)—no words or translations (*The Spectrum of Music*—Level 1 1980, 55 and 59; *Silver Burdett*

Music—Kindergarten 1985, 151). While some Native American music features vocables, when these are the only representations of Native songs included, as is often the case, non-Native children are left with the impression that Indians have no fully developed languages. Perhaps the most blatant and familiar example of stereotyped music is the musical *Peter Pan*, with its “Ugh-A-Wug” song. We cannot excuse blatant stereotypes just because they are considered “art.” These images are still damaging to children.

§ *Depersonalization*

One of the most insidious stereotypes of Native American peoples is their dehumanization in books and songs. They are often portrayed as animals in children’s books, because authors and illustrators seem to believe that just adding a headdress automatically makes anything into an “Indian.” The following are just a few of the numerous books that portray Native American peoples as animals, or vice versa: *The Eleventh Hour* (Base 1993), which shows a tiger in feathered headdress; *Teddy Bears ABC* (Gretz 1975), which includes two teddy bears carrying a headdress; *Richard Scarry’s Find Your ABC’s* (Scarry 1986), which includes a cat dressed in buckskin shirt and headdress and a raccoon in a headband and feather; *Clifford’s Halloween* (Bridwell 1967), in which a dog wears war paint, a blanket, and a headdress and smokes a pipe; *Alligators All Around: An Alphabet* (Sendak 1962), in which one alligator wears a headdress and carries a tomahawk, and another alligator sits stoically, smoking a pipe; and *The Stupids Step Out* (Allard 1974), which shows a dog wearing a headdress. Native peoples are further objectified when they are used as objects for counting in children’s songs and counting books. The most widespread example is undoubtedly “Ten Little Indians,” which spreads generationally by word of mouth and is perpetuated in music books such as the kindergarten volume of *Silver Burdett Music* (1985, 30). Many adults who grew up singing this song themselves have a hard time understanding why it is objectionable. They must remember that items used for counting are almost always inanimate objects or animals. To group Native Americans with animals or objects is the height of dehumanization. It supports an image of Indian peoples that is undifferentiated by culture and less than human. Just to experience how it feels to be a counting object, try putting your own race or ethnic group into the song. Would any of us sing about ten little white boys, Jews, or African Americans?

Cultural Insensitivity

Omission of Native peoples from the curriculum, inaccurate curriculum, and stereotyping all amount to cultural insensitivity. This is heightened, however, when well-meaning teachers introduce projects that are culturally inappropriate. Teachers may decide to have children “make” an object from a Native culture or ceremony because they equate such activities with hands-on learning. In fact, these activities often demean Native cultures, lead to misunderstanding, and perpetuate stereotypes. It is helpful to analyze various activities in order to understand why they are so problematic. The following are some typical projects often introduced into early childhood programs, along with an explanation of what the objects signify to Native cultures and why including them as projects is inappropriate. Several activity books, all purchased at national early childhood conferences, are discussed; however, teachers will recognize that the types of activities described in these books are typical of those in numerous books sold throughout the country. Teachers should especially note that many of these activities involve sacred objects. When teachers simplify these ceremonial objects, they take away from their sacredness.

§ *Feathers and Headdresses*

This is one of the most common “Indian” activities used by teachers of young children. Some activity books, such as *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 51–56), give specific directions for war bonnets or headdresses. They illustrate the somewhat prevalent attitude that children can play Indian, just as they might play cowboy. The important difference is that *cowboy* is an occupation, while *Indian* is a race. Native peoples do not consider making headdresses or using feathers in “Indian” projects to be acceptable. To Native peoples, feathers are sacred. They are often used in ceremonial practice. As a comparison, teachers would not have children make and wear yarmulkes, the traditional rounded caps used by Jewish men to cover their heads in the presence of G-d, as a strategy for understanding Jewish people.

§ *Peace Pipe*

We often hear references to a “peace pipe,” and in *More Than Moccasins* children are directed to make peace pipes out of toilet paper tubes (Carlson 1994, 36). The Pipe is so sacred to Native American peoples that it is brought out only for very significant occasions. Although traditional

teachings about how the Pipe was given to various Indian Nations differ, all agree on the sacredness of the Pipe. To the Lakota people, the *Chunupa* (Pipe) symbolizes earth, all things that grow on earth, and all things that are on earth. This is represented on the Pipe by leather, feathers, sweet grass, and sage. Indian people consider the term “peace pipe” to be derogatory and feel that class projects that involve the Pipe take away from its sacredness. They therefore regard such activities as highly inappropriate, in the same way that people from other religious traditions would object to children creating representations of their sacred icons.

§ *Sun Dance Skull*

To many people, the term “sun dance” evokes images of an exotic Indian dance (or perhaps a particular automobile). Several activity books, including *The Kids’ Multicultural Art Book* (Terzian 1993, 22–25) and *Multicultural Festivals* (Weir 1995, 43–45), suggest having children make the buffalo skull from the Sun Dance. The buffalo skull is part of the *Wi Wacipi*, one of the most sacred ceremonies in the Lakota religion. Needless to say, it is held in deep respect, as are important religious icons in other faiths. Incorporating sacred items such as this into class art projects demeans them. Instead of helping children understand Native cultures, it teaches disrespect for their beliefs and traditions.

§ *Totem Poles*

Many teachers introduce totem poles as individual or class sculpture projects. *Global Art* (Kohl 1998, 127) gives directions for making totem poles out of boxes, while *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 169–171), *Multicultural Festivals* (Weir 1995, 15–18), and *The Kids’ Multicultural Art Book* (Terzian 1993, 30–33) suggest making them out of egg cartons, paper towel tubes, boxes, or paper. Totem poles are still carved by Native Nations in the Pacific Northwest to preserve important teachings, traditions, and historical events and communicate them to future generations. A common phrase in the English language, “low man on the totem pole,” conveys a huge misconception. Among Indian people, the bottom of the totem pole is the most sacred place to be since the one at the bottom supports the whole world. While totem poles were never worshiped, a misconception of missionaries that led to the wholesale destruction of totem poles, they are used

in important ceremonies. When teachers simplify totem poles by turning them into craft projects, they take away their deep meaning.

§ *Fancy Dance Bustle*

Traditional Native American dance regalia should not be equated with a dance costume. The regalia of Native dancers represent a part of their personal identity and also their affiliation with a particular Indian Nation. Dance regalia are considered sacred. Nevertheless, *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 48) suggests that children make dance bustles out of pizza boxes and paper plates. Indian children don't play with dance regalia, because they are taught to respect it. Non-Native children also should be taught cultural respect. They should not be encouraged to make or play with Native American dance regalia.

§ *Indian Tom-toms*

Teachers err when they assume Native American drums are just musical instruments, as are most drums in European cultures. Thus, they often assemble materials for children to create "Indian" drums. *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 83–84) suggests that Indian drums be made from oatmeal boxes. To American Indian people, the Drum is sacred and represents the heartbeat. It is treated with great respect. For example, singers at powwows never leave the Drum unattended. Indian children do not make drums; neither should non-Native children create drums designated as Indian.

§ *Fetish Necklaces*

Out of ignorance, teachers may assume that fetish necklaces are just cute pieces of jewelry. *More Than Moccasins* suggests carving the animals out of soap (Carlson 1994, 64–65). The fetishes used in traditional Native necklaces were given to individuals and families and are similar to the historical family and clan crests in European societies. As such, they carry special, spiritual significance. Just as children from one family or clan would not make or wear the crest from another family, teachers should not encourage children to re-create fetishes from Hopi or other Native Nations. To do so contributes to misunderstanding and a lack of respect for cultures not their own.

§ *Dream Catchers*

Dream catcher kits are commonly sold in craft stores, and *The Kids' Multicultural Art Book* (Terzian 1993, 44–45) suggests making them out of paper plates. It is important for teachers to understand the significance of dream catchers; otherwise, they may introduce activities that mock cultural traditions. Dream catchers are traditionally given to children by their parents, as was the case with Guy, who gave a dream catcher to his young son when he was having bad dreams. The purpose of the dream catcher is to catch the child's dreams in its web so that the bad dreams can melt away in the morning sun. It is sacred to the parent and child relationship and creates special memories. To see the dream catcher reduced to a class craft project takes away from that special significance.

§ *Magic Power Shields*

A typical stereotype of American Indian peoples is one of mysticism and magic. Some activity books, such as *The Kids' Multicultural Art Book* (Terzian 1993, 18–19), suggest that children create “magic power shields” out of paper plates. Teachers should be aware that many Indian people do not appreciate seeing traditional objects referred to as “magical,” with symbols that have special significance to individuals incorporated into class projects. Activities such as this can build barriers between cultures and create animosity. Part of learning to understand and respect various cultures is becoming aware that symbols may mean different things in different traditions. For example, in many Native cultures the clown is considered sacred because he makes you laugh. This is a very different significance than that accorded to the clown in European American society. To refer to “magical power shields” reinforces stereotypes of the superstitious American Indian and suggests that Native Americans are not as advanced spiritually as other peoples.

§ *Sand Paintings*

Teachers sometimes assume that it is okay to have children create Navajo (Diné) sand paintings because colored sand is used for other art activities. The activity books *Global Art* (Kohl 1998, 125) and *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 172) give specific directions for children to make Navajo sand paintings, although the authors acknowledge that they are part of religious or healing ceremonies. Sand paintings are indeed sometimes used

as part of Diné healing ceremonies, and Diné elders confirm that they are regarded as sacred in the culture. It may be helpful for teachers to reflect upon how they treat the sacred practices of other religions. For example, while early childhood teachers often incorporate bead stringing into the art curriculum, they do not go a step further and have children make rosaries. Diné sand painting poses the same kind of situation. While working with colored sand may be a fine art activity, teachers should not associate children's art explorations with sacred Navajo sand painting.

§ *Pictographs*

Another typical preschool art activity, straw blown painting, is transformed into an Indian pictograph project in *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 166). Pictographs were a way for Native cultures to pass down their histories to future generations. They were very significant to the culture, as the people would have to determine what events were most worthy of preserving. Thus, while blowing air through straws to move paint is a fine art or science activity for young children, associating a craft project with important Native traditions is not.

§ *Face Painting*

Face painting is another way in which non-Native children associate Native American peoples with war and violence. *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 71) gives directions for war paint and other types of Indian face paint. Recently, Guy was asked to bring Native American dancers, singers, and storytellers into the Dayton schools for a special program. At the first school they visited, the dancers wore regalia but did not have time to paint their faces. The children enjoyed the program and responded positively. After lunch, however, the dancers had enough time to apply paint before the afternoon performances. As the dancers entered the stage, the children became frightened and began to scream hysterically. They screamed so loudly, in fact, that they drowned out the Drum. When the children had finally calmed down, Guy explained the significance of the colors of the paint and described how the manner in which the face is painted tells a story. The dancers then related how each design used in their face paint was given to them in ceremony. When evaluating activities, teachers must recognize that television, movies, and books have all created powerful

images for children of war-painted savages. Introducing face painting as an “Indian” activity reinforces these images and detracts from the significance and symbolism of the paint to the individual and the culture.

§ *Rattles*

As with drums, activity books such as *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 78–82) treat Native American rattles as rhythm instruments to be copied as classroom projects. Among Indian people, however, rattles are sacred and are used in ceremony. Thus, while it is fine to use rattles or maracas in the classroom, teachers should not cross the cultural boundary of making specifically “Indian rattles.” Rattles have a special significance in Native cultures that should be respected.

§ *Kachinas*

Kachinas look like exotic dolls to educators who don’t appreciate their cultural significance. They appear in the Native American toys section of *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 97) and as paper cut-outs in *Multicultural Festivals* (Weir 1995, 11–14). To the Hopi people, Kachinas are sacred and are given for a special purpose. Thus, it is not appropriate to have children make them as an arts and crafts project.

§ *Brown Bag Vests*

Teachers sometimes have children make “Indian” vests from paper bags. *The Kids’ Multicultural Art Book* (Terzian 1993, 16) and *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 41) give instructions. Brown bag vests are not sacred, but they do reinforce the “all Indians are the same” stereotype that is common among children and society as a whole. While some Indian peoples wore leather vests, others did not. Another problem with this type of activity is that it conveys the notion that children can become Indian by dressing up. As with other cultures, the apparel of American Indian people is part of their identity, both as individuals and as part of their Native Nation.

When considering activities that involve materials held sacred by particular groups of people, teachers should reflect on the care that other segments of society may use in similar situations. In a recent production of the Verdi opera *Nabucco*, set designers for the Cincinnati Opera Company wanted to include an enlarged text of the Torah, sacred scripture of Judaism, for the

backdrop. They realized, however, that this would not be acceptable practice since the Torah is holy text. Rather than pushing ahead anyway, they turned to Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati for assistance. Eventually, a Samaritan text was located and used for the production. Although use of this text was considered acceptable by the Jewish community, it is still considered sacred and therefore must be given to a synagogue at the end of the production rather than discarded (Hutton 2001).

Educators should take note that having children make sacred objects in school, such as many of those cited above, has been ruled by at least one court as transgressing the separation of church and state. In White Plains, New York, a federal judge found a school district in violation of the law for allowing a teacher to have children cut out elephant-head images of the Hindu deity Ganesha, make toothpick “worry dolls,” and build an altar for an Earth Day liturgy (Zielbauer 1999; Associated Press 1999).

Goals for Early Childhood Educators

Our goals for educators reflect a deep conviction that learning environments for all children will improve as teachers become more informed about specific issues in diversity. In order to help future generations, we must first inform and guide teachers. Changing the way we teach is never easy. Patterns of teaching and favored curriculum activities and materials can become deeply ingrained. Thoughtful educators, though, never stop learning and improving. Our goals, then, are directed at changing outcomes for children as well as educating and empowering teachers to make appropriate choices of curriculum materials and teaching strategies. The following chapters expand upon these objectives.

Outcomes for Children

§ Understand similarities among all peoples

Children quickly perceive and comment on differences among people. Through appropriate curriculum and sensitive teaching, they can also begin to understand the similarities that link all peoples.

§ *Understand, respect, and embrace differences among peoples*

Young children are egocentric. They have a hard time understanding that not everyone views things the same way they do. Adults often seem to have the same problem when dealing with cultural differences. Carefully selected curriculum and teaching strategies can help children feel comfortable with differences among peoples without viewing people from cultures other than their own as exotic or weird.

§ *Develop accurate images of Native peoples*

We know that even young children hold inaccurate and stereotypical images of American Indians. Our goal is to counter these images with positive, accurate images that reflect Native peoples today.

Outcomes for Teachers

§ *Learn to accurately evaluate Native American curriculum materials*

In most cases, teachers lack the background and education to adequately evaluate Native American content in the literature and materials they use. With increased knowledge and sensitivity to diversity issues, they can make more informed choices.

§ *Develop appropriate strategies for implementing Native curriculum*

Teachers often feel that the best way to learn about American Indians is to isolate them as a unit of study. A much more respectful and developmentally appropriate strategy is to integrate Native literature and curricular materials throughout the year, in all units of study.

§ *Develop a resource file of appropriate Native literature and curriculum materials*

As teachers begin to discard inappropriate materials, there are many outstanding Native children's books and resources to take their place. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about the materials available and where to find them.

§ *Understand how to recognize and avoid stereotypes of American Indian peoples*

Teachers need to become sensitized to the many stereotypes of Native peoples that abound in our society. Only then can they adequately screen materials and terminology that promote inaccurate and negative images.

§ *Know where to go to find answers about Native issues in educational environments*

Inevitably, there will be some popular book or teaching material that teachers wonder about. Knowing whom to contact to ask respectful questions empowers teachers to continue to improve their teaching materials and practices.

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