

Teaching Kids the Wonderful Diversity of American Indians

The awareness teachers and parents need to teach children about American Indians accurately and respectfully.

By Bernhard Michaelis, Founder, Native Child

This article is reprinted from Children and Families, Vol.XVI No.4 , Fall 1997, the journal of the National Head Start Association. Children and Families is published quarterly for NHSA members. For information on joining NHSA, please call (703) 739-0875.

"Don't yell like a bunch of wild Indians!" shouts a mother trying to quiet her children in a supermarket in Cortez, Colorado. A long-time American Indian Head Start teacher from the Navajo Reservation is standing close by, feeling hurt and insulted. "We would never say that to our Head Start kids," the teacher explains. "But I hear things like that all the time when I go shopping off the Reservation." The teacher's frustration is understandable.

Throughout our lives, we have been bombarded by stereotypical portrayals of American Indians. Books, television programs, movies, and toys tend to depict Native Americans as oversimplified feather-wearing characters. Inaccurate and often offensive representations of American Indians are deeply rooted in the American consciousness.

As a result, we have become desensitized to terminology and imagery that is offensive to American Indians. For example, we might not think it's odd to ask our kids to line up Indian file. And we might not see any reason our kids shouldn't dress up and play Indians.

American Indian children who frequently encounter stereotypical images of their cultures are hindered in developing a feeling of pride in their heritage and a healthy self-image. When asked, there are American Indian preschoolers who will say they are not Indians. Why? Because they have already learned from popular movies and cartoons that Indians wear feathers and face paint and live in tipis and carry tomahawks. Preschoolers don't look like that, so they don't consider themselves Indians.

Young children believe what they see and hear. As Head Start teachers, we are in an excellent position to teach children factual information about American Indians and at the same time dispel any myths or stereotypes that have entered our classrooms.

American Indians are not all the same

One of the most popular misconceptions about American Indians is that they are all the same - one homogenous group of people who look alike, speak the same language, and share the same customs and history. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Although American Indians make up less than one percent of the U.S. population, American Indians represent half of the nation's languages and cultures. This statistic may seem incredible, but remember that American Indians were the soul inhabitants of this continent until Europeans arrived only five centuries ago. Before that, Native Americans had thousands of years to migrate across the country in small groups and, in relative isolation from one another, develop unique cultural identities.

Today there are about 500 American Indian tribes, each with its own language and cultural traditions. The Diné Nation (Navajo) is by far the largest, with 170,000 members. Other large tribes include the Oglala Sioux, Cherokee Nation, Blackfeet, Fort Apache, Gila River,

Hopi, Papago, San Carlos Apache, Rosebud Sioux, and Zuñi Pueblo. Almost half of all tribes have fewer than 1,000 members, but they still have their own unique identity. From tribe to tribe, there are large differences in clothing, housing, life-styles, and cultural practices. Sadly, these differences are not appreciated by most non-Native Americans, because the rich diversity of American Indians is not reflected, nor is it presented accurately, in readily available teaching materials, popular entertainment, and children's toys. Toy manufacturers typically misrepresent American Indians by creating toys that, for example, mix the tipi from the Plains culture or the totem pole from the Northwest Pacific Coast groups with the Navajo rug, loom, or desert plants from the Southwest groups.

The truth about feathers and headbands

We are all familiar with the popular use of a headband with one feather or a headdress containing numerous feathers (warbonnet) as symbols for Indian imagery. And many of us encourage our children to make feather headbands - after all, we made them when we were kids. But these headbands are a trite representation of American Indians.

Historically, eagle feathers were worn only by certain members of the Plains cultural groups who had distinguished themselves as worthy of such adornment. Feathered headdresses were not worn as everyday clothing, but rather for special ceremonial occasions. Today, feathers still carry highly religious meaning in most tribes. Making feathered fans in tribes for Pow Wows and religious ceremonies is accompanied by appropriate prayers and songs. Handling feathers is not taken lightly.

Despite the purpose of feathers in certain American Indian cultures, it might seem a little severe to stop making feather headbands in Head Start classrooms. After all, it's just a fun way of introducing our children to Indians. But as teachers, would we put a Catholic priest's robe in the dramatic play area?

Strategies for teaching about American Indians accurately

American Indian tribes all over this country are putting enormous effort into preserving, restoring, and reviving their cultural heritages for future generations. There are specific strategies Head Start teachers and parents can embrace to assist in this process.

For instance, instead of teaching children that "Indians lived in tipis," which incorrectly implies that all American Indians lived in tipis, explain that different tribes lived in different dwellings. For example, the Pueblo Indians lived (and some still do) in terraced-style stone and adobe houses. The people of the Northwest lived in spacious buildings made of wood. Some tribes in the East lived in huge longhouses constructed of tree poles and bark. The Navajos (Diné) of the Southwest lived in hogans, a hexagon tree pole structure covered with mud. Still others lived in structures adapted to nomadic life, using wooden poles and coverings available from the surrounding environment.

Today, of course, Native Americans live in houses, apartments, and mobile homes. It is important to point this out to children and teach them about the many aspects of life among contemporary Native Americans. Otherwise, children may think that Indians are extinct.

When referring to one tribe or Indian nation, use its correct name: Cheyenne, Hopi, Apache, and so forth. Choose books that focus on a single tribe. Make sure that the depiction of housing, life-style, clothing and so forth is accurate for the specific group.

Make sure your books portray Indians in a respectful manner. For example, books with illustrations of animals, cartoon characters, or children at play wearing headdresses, pipes, or other

items sacred to American Indians are especially offensive and disrespectful. Such illustrations do not encourage us to view Native Americans as human beings.

When evaluating books, toys, or play activities, ask yourself these questions: Is there anything that would embarrass or hurt a Native child? Is there anything that would foster stereotypical thinking in a non-Indian child? If you're not certain which materials are appropriate, use it as a learning opportunity: Contact American Indian Head Start staff members to expand your knowledge.

In the dramatic play area, dress your American Indian dolls in the same clothing as your other dolls. Bring out native clothing, such as moccasins, dancing shawls, and so forth, only on special occasions.

When purchasing posters and pictures of children for your classroom, choose ones with multiracial groups, including American Indians. This will help give the children, staff, parents, and visitors in your Head Start classroom a greater appreciation for the wonderful racial diversity of Americans.

At Thanksgiving time, shift the focus away from reenacting the First Thanksgiving and decorating your classroom with Pilgrims and Indians. Instead, focus on things the children can be thankful for in their own lives. Teaching about American Indians only at Thanksgiving exclusively from a historical perspective will promote the idea that they exist only in the past.

Increase your knowledge about American Indians by looking for Pow Wows - social or religious gatherings - in your area. Contact the organizers and ask whether you and your students can attend. Invite American Indians to your classroom to discuss their culture. Treat them as educators for your children, not entertainers.

A challenging and rewarding undertaking

Not all American Indian communities have had the same historical experience and because each American Indian is unique, what may be offensive to one may not be offensive to another. For example, most Native Americans find the popular Head Start song "Ten Little Indians" offensive. But others don't mind it. One American Indian Head Start teacher sings an enlightening variation of the song in which she adds verses for "Ten Little Mexicans," "Ten Little African-Americans," and so on.

The diversity of American Indian cultures is so grand that it may be challenging to comprehend. Yet, as educators and parents, it is our responsibility to try. Just the act of trying to inform ourselves about American Indians is a great sign of respect. And using your new knowledge and common sense will go a long way in helping us successfully determine how to best teach our children about American Indians.

The Current Condition of Native Americans

By Harold Hodgkinson, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.

Despite all of the trauma inflicted upon the indigenous peoples of North America during the past several hundred years, they have survived. Today, Native Americans make up a vigorously growing part of the U.S. population. This Digest begins with a remembrance of Native Americans' past, followed by a brief description of their ancient and current diversity. The Digest continues with current information about where they live; the growth of their numbers; and the

status of their health, employment, and education. The Digest closes with an assessment of recent progress made by Native Americans and challenges they still face.

IN THE BEGINNING...

It was clear, as we Americans began preparations for the celebration of the "discovery" of America by Columbus some 500 years ago, that the ground had shifted under our feet. First, we learned that Columbus was the fourth "discoverer" of America and that he never set foot on the land that makes up the United States. Then we learned that at least 3 million people already lived on the North American continent in 1492. We have also begun to appreciate that what Columbus took back--maize, potatoes, tobacco, and wilderness survival skills, for example--was far more important than what he left behind--mainly horses, guns, and disease. We now know, too, that the first real discoverers of the hemisphere probably migrated across the Bering Strait to the western part of the North American continent. From there, they migrated to South America, then back north through the eastern part of what is now the U.S. All of this took place thousands of years before 1492. In fact, calling the Native peoples of North America "Indians" perpetuates Columbus' error in thinking he was in the East Indies. Indeed, given what we know today about the treatment of indigenous peoples during the westward expansion, the notion of venerating Columbus as a hero is unsettling. We know, for instance, how a major food source--the buffalo--came close to total ruin, along with Native families and tribal identities.

NATIVE AMERICANS IN 1992

Any description of Native Americans must begin with a reminder of a historical condition that continues to shape Native American societies even today. Native Americans, originally, were the entire American population. As such, they developed an amazing variety of linguistic and cultural traditions. Even today, when they make up less than one percent of the U.S. total, they represent half of the nation's languages and cultures. This diversity within a small population must be kept in mind, always.

Although many tribal traditions are at risk of dying out, Indians as a group are a growing population in 1992. Some 1,959,000 people claimed American Indian status on the 1990 Census form. There is extraordinary diversity in this population, representing about 500 tribes in the U. S.; of these tribes, 308 are recognized by the federal government.

EXPANSION OF THE NATIVE POPULATION

Along with the 1.9 million American Indian and Alaska Natives, over 5 million Americans indicated on their Census forms that they were of Indian descent. If even a quarter of these 5 million people decide to reclaim their Indian heritage in the next Census (in the year 2000), there could be an astonishing growth in population figures for Native Americans--with no increase in birth rates.

Recent movies and novels have featured Natives mostly in a favorable light. This improved media portrayal could increase the numbers who make the switch in which ethnic identity they claim. The Census taker used to decide a person's ethnic identity; today the respondent does, which is a step in the right direction.

RESIDENCE

We know from the 1990 Census where Native Americans live. Of the 1.9 million, about 637,000 are living on reservations or Trust Lands. However, 46,000 live in the New York/Long Island/New Jersey/Connecticut Combined Metro Area (CMA); 87,000 in the Los Angeles CMA; 15,000 in the Chicago CMA; and 40,000 in the San Francisco CMA; just to name the largest. A minimum of 252,000 Native Americans lived in cities in 1990.

More than half of the Native American population in 1990 lived in the following six states: Oklahoma (252,000), California (242,000), Arizona (204,000), New Mexico (134,000), Alaska (86,000), and Washington state (81,000). In growth from 1980-1990, Oklahoma led with an 83,000 person increase. Arizona's population was up 51,000 and California's was up 41,000. One reservation dominates all others in population--the Navajo reservation that occupies parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah has 143,000 residents. The next largest reservation, home to the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) people, is Pine Ridge located in South Dakota, with 11,000. Of the 500 tribes and bands in the nation, 10 made up half of the Indian population in 1980. This fact means there is a large number of very small tribes; many of these small tribes have few young people, which makes their futures uncertain. (The word "endangered" comes to mind.)

FERTILITY AND HEALTH CHARACTERISTICS

American Indians have a fertility rate about twice that of other Americans, partly because they are, on average, about 7 years younger than the U.S. average. Actually, the birth rate is not increasing. Rather, infant deaths are decreasing, resulting in a large increase of young Natives. Indeed, the Census reports that from 1980 to 1990, Natives increased their numbers by 54 percent. The Indian Health Service has played a role in reducing infant mortality, from 60 deaths per 1,000 births from 1955 to 10 in 1985. Unfortunately, despite some reduction in alcoholism rates, the death rate from alcohol-related causes is still three times higher among Indians than the rate in the general population. This rate includes deaths due to fetal alcohol syndrome and drug- and alcohol-related accidents, suicides, and criminal offenses. Of all treatment services provided by the Indian Health Service in 1988, 70 percent were alcohol-related. With some real progress in the areas of safe births and child health, the rest of Native health is a mixed bag. Thus, while Natives have made major advances in reducing infant deaths and improving public health facilities, several major problems remain. The most prominent of the remaining needs include creating jobs on reservations and reducing alcohol-related accidents, crime, suicide, and poverty.

JOBS

A Native American who wants a middle class job will likely have to leave the reservation. This circumstance may account, in part, for the movement of Indians to metro areas. One way to increase the availability of jobs in rural areas and on reservations is to start new businesses. Many Natives are engaged in this strategy. In 1987, Indians owned 17,000 businesses with cash receipts of \$800 million; Eskimos owned 2,300; and Aleuts owned 1,100. Most of these businesses employ small numbers of workers, and not all are located on reservations. A larger proportion of the 4,000 Native-owned businesses in Alaska are located in Native villages compared to the proportion of Native-owned businesses in California (numbering 3,200) that are located on reservations.

EDUCATION

Major changes in Native education have occurred in the past two decades. The notorious boarding schools, which took Indian children from their families and tribes and attempted to make Anglos out of them, are now mainly gone. More Indian youth are enrolled in schools and colleges that are either run by tribal leadership or in which tribal views are important to decision-making.

There has been a major increase in college attendance, indicated by the increase in the numbers of Natives taking the SAT-- from 2,662 in 1976 to 18,000 in 1989. Of the 103,000 Natives who were in college in 1990, about half were in two-year colleges and half in four-year. The states with highest enrollments are California with 21,000 native students; Oklahoma with 9,600; Ari-

zona with 8,800; and New Mexico with 4,500. The 24 Tribal Colleges, most of which offer two-year programs, have rapidly increasing enrollments. In addition, several associations currently encourage Indian youth to aspire to higher education. The American Indian Science and Engineering Society and the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering are just two of a growing number of such associations.

Less is known about the 391,000 Indians in elementary and secondary education. Many public schools on or near reservations are becoming increasingly responsive to the special needs of Indian youth. In some cases, the local tribal language and culture are taught at school, which is a major reversal of the previous attempts (such as in the boarding schools) to eliminate Indian language and culture. Indian parents are becoming increasingly involved in school activities, including holding offices as school board members.

Many expect these improvements will help young Indians take pride in their language and cultural traditions, which should be important in increasing the number of youth who attend college. More needs to be done to provide information about college to youth in elementary and junior high school. Many Native students do not take the courses required for college admission, particularly in math and science.

THE BOTTOM LINE

This is a period of great possibilities for Native Americans. After centuries of misinformation, the average American has now gained a limited knowledge about the historical mistreatment of Natives, the importance of treaty rights, and the differences in world views between Americans of European descent and Native Americans. Examples of Native beliefs that are different from European-based beliefs include the following:

- * that land is sacred and cannot be owned;

- * that one is wise to wait for a speaker to finish and think deeply about what was said before formulating a response;

- * that to foul the land is to insult your ancestors;

- * that all things have their own identities, such as plants, which are "the rooted ones." These are all ideas that many Americans find appealing. It may well be that many Native views of the world will become "mainstream" in the next decade. Many of the problems faced by Native Americans can be traced back to the conflicts between their desire to perpetuate their cultural heritage and the pressure to assimilate into the larger society. All ethnic groups wrestle with this conflict to some extent. A complicating factor for Native Americans is that there is an incredible diversity of cultures that falls into the category of Native American. Rather than preserving one language and way of life, they must preserve hundreds of relatively complete cultures. The current generation of American Indian and Alaska Native youth have a genuine choice between being proud to be an American and being proud to be a Native. As stated, those choices appear mutually exclusive. If they wish, they can live a tradition-oriented Native lifestyle, or they can move completely into the mainstream American middle class. Or (and this is the more complex choice) they can lead lives that include productive elements of both. Given the pluralistic American tradition, many share the hope that Indian youth will find ways to do the latter, both for the sake of their fulfillment as individuals and for the enrichment of American society.

REFERENCES

Evangelauf, Jean. (1992). Minority-group enrollment at colleges rose 10% from 1988 to 1990, reaching record levels. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 38 (20), A33, 37.

Hodgkinson, H.L., Outtz, J.H., & Obarakpor, A.M. (1990). *The demographics of American Indians*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership. (ED 330 509).

Indian Health Service. (1990). Trends in Indian health, 1990. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services.

Snipp, C.M. (1989). American Indians: The first of this land. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Thornton, R. (1987). American Indian holocaust and survival: A population history since 1492. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

U.S. Census Bureau. (1990). Characteristics of American Indians by tribe and selected areas. Washington, DC: Census Bureau.

U.S. Census Bureau. (1990). We, the first Americans. Washington, DC: Census Bureau.

U.S. Department of Education. (1991). Indian Nations At Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action. Washington, DC: Author. (ED 339 587).

Harold Hodgkinson, noted author and lecturer, directs the Center for Demographic Policy at the Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc. in Washington, DC.

This publication was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RI88062016. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the Department of Education.

G. Cantoni (Ed.) (1996), Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Flagstaff: Center for Excellence in Education, Northern Arizona University

Appropriate Methods When Teaching About Native American Peoples

By Ableza Institute, Native American Arts and Media, San Jose, CA

Understand the term "Native American" includes all peoples indigenous to the Western Hemisphere. Present Native American Peoples as appropriate role models to children. Native American students should not be singled out and asked to describe their families' traditions or their peoples' culture(s). Avoid the assumption there are no Native American students in your class. Use books and materials which are written and illustrated by Native American people as primary source materials: speeches, songs, poems, and writings, which show the linguistic skill of a people who have come from an oral tradition.

When teaching ABC's, avoid "I is for Indian" and "E is for Eskimo." Avoid rhymes or songs that use Native Americans as counting devices, i.e. "One little, two little, three little..." Research the traditions and histories, oral and written, of Native Americans before attempting to teach these. Avoid referring to or using materials which depict Native Americans as "savages," "primitives," "The Noble Savage," "Red Man," "Red Race," "simple," or "extinct." Present Native American Peoples as having unique, separate, and distinct cultures, languages, beliefs, traditions, and customs. Avoid materials which use non-Native Americans or other characters dressed as "Indians."

Avoid craft activities which trivialize Native American dress, dance, and beliefs, i.e. toilet-paper roll kachinas or "Indian dolls", paper bag and construction paper costumes and head-dresses. Research authentic methods and have the proper materials. Realize that many songs, dances, legends, and ceremonies of Native American Peoples are considered sacred and should

not be "invented" or portrayed as an activity.

If your educational institution employs images or references to Native American peoples as mascots, i.e. "Redskins", "Indians," "Chiefs," "Braves," etc. urge your administration to abandon these offensive names.

Correct and guide children when they "war whoop," use "jaw-breaker" jargon, or employ any other stereotypical mannerisms.

Depict Native American peoples, past and present, as heroes who are defending their people, rights, and lands. Avoid manipulative phrases and wording such as "massacre," "victory," and "conquest" which distort facts and history.

Teach Native American history as a regular part of American History and discuss what went wrong or right.

Avoid materials and texts which illustrate Native American heroes as only those who helped Europeans and Euro-Americans, i.e. Thanksgiving.

Use materials and texts which outline the continuity of Native American societies from past to present. Use materials which show respect and understanding of the sophistication and complexities of Native American societies. Understand and impart that the spiritual beliefs of Native American Peoples are integral to the structure of our societies and are not "superstitions" or "heathen."

Invite a Native American guest speaker/presenter to your class or for a school assembly. Contact a local Native American organization or your library for a list of these resources. Offer an honorarium or gift to those who visit your school.

Avoid the assumption that a Native American person knows everything about all Native Americans.

Use materials which show the value Native American Peoples place on our elders, children, and women. Avoid offensive terms such as "papoose", and "squaw." Use respectful language.

Understand that not all Native American Peoples have "Indian" surnames, but familiar European and Hispanic names as well.

Help children understand Native American Peoples have a wide variety of physical features, attributes, and value as do people of ALL cultures and races.

Most of all, teach children about Native Americans in a manner that you would like used to depict YOUR culture and racial/ethnic origin.