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COLUMBUS

Another time of year when Indians are discussed in elementary school is during a lesson about Columbus. There is much that is not commonly known about Columbus. His is a very complicated history that is often presented in the form of a romantic myth.

First, Columbus did not “discover America.” In his four trips across the Atlantic, he never landed on any piece of land that is now a part of the United States of America. Even if he had, his travels came 500 years after the Vikings, who arrived thousands of years after the first American Indians. What right did Columbus have to claim the territories where he landed for Spain? Other European nations made similar claims as well. Again, those lands had already been inhabited for thousands of years.

Are your students aware of what happened after Columbus landed in what is so often inaccurately referred to as “The New World?” Do they know that the Spaniards used attack dogs on the Indians? Do they know that Columbus’ men cut off the hands and burned alive many Indians? Do they know Columbus’ role in the slave trade, how he sent hundreds of Indians back to Spain to be sold as slaves? Do the books used in your classroom refer to the people on the islands simply as Indians, or does it give their correct names, Taino, Arawak, and Carib? 4

Some people have the mistaken impression that the specific native peoples (tribes or ethnic groups) Columbus encountered are all now extinct. The Taino were not completely wiped out by disease and genocide. Hundreds still live in much the same way as their ancestors did. 5

MODERN LIFE

Although a teacher must cover historical aspects of American Indian life, it is also important to give an accurate picture of life today. Point out to your children that American Indians can be found in all walks of life. Although American Indians make up only one percent of the United States population, they account for twenty percent of wildland firefighters. Some of the all-Indian crews were used to search for remnants of the Space Shuttle Columbia. 6

Commander John Herrington (Choctaw) became the first American Indian in space when he flew onboard the shuttle Endeavor. 7

During the 20th century, Mohawk ironworkers helped build a great deal of the famous New York City skyline, and they then worked at the scene of the 9/11 disaster. 8

If children are to grow up without racial bias, elementary school teachers must play a significant role in becoming educated themselves about American Indian history and culture, closely examine the materials used in the classroom, avoid perpetuating stereotypes, and help their children learn that American Indians are an important part of today’s world.

Are their cultures portrayed as simplistic? Is there no reference to modern American Indian life? Such books should be avoided, or perhaps balanced with more informative resources. 2

Be aware of the language used, not only in history textbooks and children's literature, but in discussions about American Indians. Our language may never be perfect, but a teacher can do much to include diverse views – and point out the complexities and shortcomings of words – when describing the clash of cultures. The word “frontier” may be used to mean the edge of civilization. If there are American Indians living beyond the bounds of white settlement, does using the term “frontier” in this way indicate that the Indians are not civilized? There may be no easy answer to such questions, but even elementary students can be introduced to historical conflicts and ironies.

Consider the word “settler,” which often refers to whites who have moved into an area. A settler technically could be any Indian who was there first. A “pioneer” is the first to do something. How can a person be a pioneer if he or she is moving into an area that is already settled? The people typically called “settlers” or “pioneers” were actually the last to enter most areas of America. And, of course, there is the term “exploration.” From an American Indian perspective, “invasion” would be more accurate. The teaching of history should include both points of view.

THANKSGIVING

It is especially important to consider when, during the school year, teachers should incorporate lessons on American Indians. Traditionally there is an emphasis at Thanksgiving, which can reinforce many stereotypes. The story is often told of how Squanto spoke English as he entered the Pilgrim's Plimoth settlement. The fact that he learned English after being captured as a slave is often left out. Nor is it often told that Plimoth was built on the ruins of a Pawtuxet village. Those images don't fit the pre-packaged American holiday! A more complete telling of history would include these facts. 3

Some Words and Phrases to Avoid

How!
Injun
Big Chief
Squaw
Papoose
Half-breed
Indian Princess
Running around like wild Indians
Sitting Indian style

When teaching a unit about Thanksgiving, be careful not to lump all Indians together. No display about the Wampanoag, who feasted with the Pilgrims in 1621, should have tipis from the Plains culture area alongside totem poles from the Northwest Coast and cardboard turkeys. Do, however, point out that hunting, feasting, and harvest festivals are significant parts of life for many cultures around the world.

For a more complete view of Thanksgiving, a teacher should point out that many American Indians today consider it a “National Day of Mourning” that is observed with fasting.

Teachers may want to consider researching the important festivals of the American Indian nations in their area, and sharing that information with the students. It is important that teachers contact representatives of the nation to be studied for accurate information and possible resources for classroom activities and discussions.

"I" is for Indian?"

Dealing with American Indian Stereotypes in the Classroom

Dr. Mark Finchum

It is of vital importance that children develop positive attitudes about ethnicity and race at an early age. Young children are not born with a racial bias, but by the time they reach high school they have often adopted the prejudices to which they have been exposed. What can an elementary teacher do about it?

ALPHABET BOOKS

Let's begin at the beginning: alphabet books in kindergarten. Typically "A" is for apple; "B" is for ball; "C" is for cat, and so on. Many times "I" is for Indian. Why should an entire race of people be categorized along with animals and inanimate objects? Try to find an alternate word that has the same phonetic sound for the letter "I." One possible replacement is igloo, but even that term refers to an historical period.

TEXTBOOKS

A second area of concern is textbooks. To help prevent the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, an elementary teacher might consider the following questions. Does the textbook give accurate and complete historical information? Is an American Indian viewpoint given for any of the historical events discussed? For example, is there a discussion of the different views of land ownership by American Indians and the early European settlers? This concept was a major factor in the conflicts between the two groups. Is there mention of boarding schools that, in the 19th and 20th centuries, sometimes held American Indian children against their will? How much discussion is included about the relationship between American Indians and the United States government? Do readers learn about the loss of land, the forced removal to reservations, and the treaties that were broken?

Do the textbooks give in-depth descriptions of or just gloss over the different American Indian culture areas? If the treatment of religions and other cultural beliefs is superficial, it may contribute to a belief that all Indians are alike. Is there a discussion of the present circumstances of American Indians? For example, is anything written about the growing population of American Indians as shown in any recent census? Textbooks often do a better job of telling how Indian people once lived, but rarely give insight into today's lifestyles. Many American Indians are choosing to maintain aspects of their original culture, yet compete in the modern world. 1

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Before using any children's literature for teaching about American Indians, look for the perpetuation of any stereotypes. Ask yourself these questions about each book: Are children shown "playing Indian?" Are silly names given to the American Indian characters in the stories? Are the Indians portrayed as primitive? Are their communities or societies depicted as generic?