Meeting the Needs of All Children — An Indian Perspective

by Harold GossMan

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Challenge stereotypes. Look at the curriculum materials that you're using in your classrooms. Look for accuracies. Find out what Indian life is like today.

My nephew's daughter is now five and attends preschool. She came home and told her family that she had learned a new song at school. Her father was very proud of the accomplishment and when I went to visit she was asked to sing the new song for Uncle. The song was "Old MacDonald." She began to sing, "Old MacDonald had a farm. . . ." She paused and thought for a minute trying to remember the words. She began again; still she couldn't remember and had difficulty with the words at the end of the phrase. She thought for a moment more, than began again, this time with the look and sound of confidence. She sang loudly, "Old MacDonald had a farm, hey ya, hey ya, ho."

My grandfather was born in 1889 on the southern Cheyenne reservation. He came out of the Tipi and was educated through the boarding school system. It wasn't because he wanted to, it was because he was taken to the school. His clothes were changed, his hair was cut, his lifestyle and his values were changed. Indians have been the victims of forced assimilation. Other minorities have had to deal with forced segregation. Our culture has been taken away and replaced by a melting pot culture that we didn't ask for. I was raised by my grandparents in western Oklahoma, on what was originally the southern Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation.

As with most children, I didn't realize at the time how the attitudes of the community around me were affecting me. I don't think now that we, as adults, realize how our attitudes and actions in general affect the children that we work with. The two most important things we can do for children are (1) to instill a sense of worth as we teach and (2) to realize that everything we do, consciously and unconsciously, impacts on this sense of worth. Thoughtless words and subtle actions can quickly undermine our program objectives.

As an adult, I feel that I'm expected to be toughened to the kinds of things that people say inadvertently. While working at a small community college in Oklahoma, I was asked to participate in a Thanksgiving dinner program—we were to have the faculty and staff serve the students who didn't go home for the holidays. When I came into the cafeteria to do my part, the vice president of the college looked around and acknowledged my presence with the state-

ment, "Our Thanksgiving is now complete; our Indian is here."

She's not an insensitive or uncaring woman; she is educated and intelligent. But the fact remains that the statement was thoughtless. I know how those words affected me as an adult. It brought about a feeling that I was the token. How do such words and attitudes affect children? Whenever we talk about any child and about any child's culture, heritage, or ancestry, our words are affecting that child's sense of worth.

Of course, Thanksgiving is the one time of the year when Indians are quite visible. One summer when I was in school I received a contract with the community arts and humanities council to prepare cultural presentations, to talk about Indians. I thought, "This is going to be great."

September came and, just as school was starting, I got a few engagements. In October, the number of requests picked up. During November, I was busy every day, going to a school or a civic group meeting. Then came December and January; the presentations were not in demand—nobody wanted to hear about Indians in January. But for Thanksgiving, the work was plentiful, the presentations were popular, and I was real busy. Is this the only image of Indian culture that we want to give children?

How can you help? By recognizing and increasing awareness of how other people regard themselves. Some people look for labels. I am sometimes asked, "Are you Indians? Native Americans? What do you prefer to be called?" We weren't Indians before Christopher Columbus discovered us. Native Americans? Well, we were here before there was an America. We are aboriginal, but that doesn't sound very good to me, and the Australians have a lock on that.

To affix a label on anyone, we first have to look to the context of the categories. By race, I am an American Indian; by citizenship, I am an American citizen. (I have also been told that by treaty with the Sioux nations and Canada, I'm also a Canadian citizen.) By nationality, I am an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux nation. I am also a hereditary member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho nations in Oklahoma. I am a resident of Oklahoma. So I am all of these things.

What label is affixed to people is not what is of importance. What is important is to move away from the tendency to only look at history. We don't look at where Indians come from in terms of geography or society, but we look at them in terms of history.

Indian children, like all children, are trying to figure out who they are and what their place is in society. If we give children inaccuracies about any culture, we do them a disservice. If we give Indian children inaccuracies about their own culture, we cause irreparable harm.

I will acknowledge that it is extremely difficult to find good resource materials on Indian culture. And it is equally as difficult to find people who agree on the value of any particular resource. There are items that we can identify in resource materials and raise awareness of the context in which they are presented.

I find items in many books that relate to Indians—American Indians *were* great hunters, Indians *were* skilled craftsmen, Indians used whatever they could find that was edible as a source of food, Indians *were* great warriors. Taken at literal value, such resources would indicate to an unknowing reader that Indians don't exist anymore, the entire race of people have ceased to exist, there are no more Indians. Everything and everyone in these types of references are referred to in the past tense.

Usually when Indian culture is referenced, it is looked at from a historical perspective. When we exclusively use these kinds of resources, we are telling Indian children that they have to put their culture aside because it's a dead culture, it's behind us, it's historical, it only exists in memory. And the message children receive is that either they don't exist or their racial and cultural identity as Indians is not important.

In order to provide a more realistic portrayal of Indians in today's world, talk to Indians. Pick up a phone book. Look under "Indian," "Native American," or "American Indian." There is a Native American center in almost every major metropolitan area in the country—Boston, Cleveland, Dallas, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles are just a few. These centers are where people group together to talk about the things of everyday life. Contact the Department of Education, Offices of Indian Education, in Washington, DC and most states. There are Title IV Indian education projects in the public schools. There are 105 Indian Head Start programs. There are more than 400 tribal government offices. The people in these offices and programs are willing to share resources and information about their culture.

We don't hear much about Indians as they are today, in everyday live. Our society is telling Indian children that they have to give up being Indian to be successful. Pick up newspapers, textbooks, or resource

materials and try to find out who was the first Indian to participate in professional sports or the first Indian to be elected to public office.

Much of what children do see about Indian culture has some negative connotations for them. Indians are used as mascots (such as the Washington Redskins and the Cleveland Indians). Do you think we will ever hear of the Kansas City Caucasians, Boston Black Guys, or the Washington White Men?

I think, and hope, that the people who named those sports teams probably had good intentions, that they thought they were honoring the people that participated and excelled in their accomplishments for those teams. The Cleveland Indians were named such in honor of Alex Sockalexis, a member of the Penobscot Tribe. He was as important to the game of baseball in the 1890's as Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron, and Johnny Bench were in their time, but we lost sight of that. Like everyone else, Indian children need heroes, people like themselves that they can look to as role models.

Now we're looking at how we're going to retain our culture. But keep in mind that it is not a remnant of a past culture that we are attempting to save, it is a present day evolving culture based on very sound values. Today, Indians group together; they practice their beliefs, their culture, adhere to traditional values and their religions. They do it in private. They do it at home. They mesh traditional values with contemporary settings.

In the traditional cultures, Indian children are taught behaviors that may work against them in the classroom. We are somewhat of an invisible population; we just go along and stay in the background. Children are taught to stay back, be quiet, listen, and figure out what's going on. Only speak when you have something to say. As a show of respect, children are taught not to challenge their elders by looking them directly in the eyes or speaking out and questioning what is being taught. But whenever that happens with the Indian children in a classroom setting, we tend to confuse them by contradicting what their families have taught them. We don't bring them out in understanding ways; we don't implement the things that will build their self-concept, that will build their self-image, the things that they can be proud of.

An Indian tradition is to use what is here. As you begin to talk about geography, and names of the cities and rivers and streets and towns, you can hardly go through a day without speaking some words that came from one of the Indian languages. Many of the places have Indian names. When we talk about food, it is interesting to note that the pre-Columbian northern European diet consisted mainly of meat and grains. But when they came to this continent, they found things like the Irish potato, Boston baked beans, tomatoes, corn, squash, and all those wonderful vegetables that we enjoy.

Challenge stereotypes. Look at the curriculum materials that you're using in your classrooms. Look for accuracies. Find out what Indian life is like today. Present this picture to children.

When I give cultural presentations to small children, and sometimes to adults, they ask questions like, "Where do Indians get their food?" I usually tell them Safeway. They ask, "Do you live in a Tipi?" I say only in the summer when I go to powwows. Some children are actually frightened when they hear that an Indian is coming to visit. We need to break some of those misconceptions. We need to look at Indians in the context of today's society and consider some of the offerings that Indians make today.

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Another Point of View

by Nila Rinehart

One of the first missionaries responsible for establishing the educational system for Alaskan Natives stated that in the south, wars were fought with Indians on the battlefield. In Alaska, the wars have been fought in the classroom. Like many tribes throughout this country, Alaskan Natives have had to endure the educational systems which have worked against the culture, family, and community systems. There are generations of people educated in boarding schools located miles, states, and worlds away from families and Native communities. It was only in the 1970's that the state of Alaska began to build schools in the small, isolated villages and communities of Alaska.

Now that we have local schools and now that my children have started attending them, I realize that we still have challenges to meet. Knowing that my children are powerless in affecting this society, I have had to become more active. As a parent—an Indian parent—I have to stand up for the rights of my children. As an Indian woman, this doesn't come easy for me. I was taught to be gentle and caring, humble and forgiving. As I become more knowledgeable about the inequalities my own children and the children in my community face, I have to become an advocate. Like a mother bear protecting her cubs, I have had to put aside my own fears and doubts and charge ahead.

Being an activist, I have learned a lot. Us Indians and Alaskan Natives have a huge amount of knowledge to offer! Now, when I talk to school superintendents and my son's kindergarten teacher, I have stopped asking for answers. It's me that knows the answers, I *know* what my children need. I *know* what my children can do and I believe I know what it will take to have better schools for all children.

When our programs for children and our society present inaccurate pictures of who Alaskan Natives and Indians are, who do we harm? It tells our Native children that their family and tribal traditions are somehow inadequate. Stereotyped images of funny "ten little Indians" minimize the value and dignity of our culture.

The sad part of all this is that non-Native children are harmed as well. Non-Native children learn a false sense of superiority, their world view and how they fit in is highly distorted. I have often felt sadness for adults who, wise with age and knowledge, were so naive about the Native people who just lived down the street.

Who is responsible for making sure that the needs of all children are cared for in programs for children? Certainly, the responsibility is the teacher's, the child care provider's, the administrator's; we all know that much. I feel, though, that the primary responsibility lies within the hands of the parents. Indian parents, grandparents, educators, and tribal leaders have a crucial role to play in this process. We cannot afford to give up our part.

We all need to recognize the accomplishments of all people regardless of race, class, sex, or age. Sometimes, we tend to dwell too much on the negative (drop out rates, school failures, etc.). We need to let all children know that Alaskan Natives and other tribal children can be successful, too.

My father, grandmothers, and grandfathers always taught me to care for those in need, to help in whatever way I could, to respect all people for what they are, and not to judge. I hope that my children learn the same values, to grow up learning that they hold the power of spirits from grandfathers and grandmothers of long ago.

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