Multicultural Education:  
Using Literature to Teach About Native Americans

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Carolyn F. Duvall

Thesis Advisor
Nina Yssel

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2001

May 5, 2001
Abstract

As the teacher and student population is changing, multicultural education is becoming an important part of education. One minority group that students need to be exposed to is the Native American culture because studies show that elementary students hold many misconceptions about the Native culture. One way to incorporate multicultural education into the curriculum is through the use of multicultural literature. There are many aspects to consider when choosing multicultural literature, which will be discussed. Finally, reviews of quality literature written about Native Americans are included.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Nina Yssel, my thesis advisor, for her guidance and patience as I worked on my thesis.
As the student population is changing, multicultural education is becoming more important. Thirty percent of the students in kindergarten through twelfth grade are from a different culture other than the dominant United States culture (Taylor, 2000). By 2020, one of every two students will be a person of color (Barta & Grindler, 1996). Multicultural education gives students an opportunity to examine the diversity of the world around them. If students learn about the similarities among different cultural groups, the differences may become easier to accept (Hillard, 1995).

The teaching population looks quite different than the student population. As diversity among students is growing, diversity among teachers is decreasing. Teachers are predominantly white, middle class, and female (Taylor, 2000). "Most of us who are teaching have grown up with life and learning experiences, and in cultures that differ significantly from those of our students" (Taylor, 2000, p. 25). Teachers have a tendency to teach what is familiar to their life experiences, values, and culture even if this does not reflect the student population.

Multicultural education is still important for classrooms even when the student population is not as diverse. If students are not exposed to cultures other than their own, there is a risk of students believing that their life experiences are the norm. "We risk miseducating all our students if we allow them to use their own cultural attitudes and values as the sole measuring stick for normal human behavior" (Taylor, 2000, p. 25). Through multicultural education, all students will gain an understanding and respect for their culture and other cultural groups (Roberts & Cecil, 1993).

Native American culture is one cultural group that all students study in elementary school. It is very important for all students to learn about the Native culture. Native
children will build self-esteem and a sense of pride as they learn about their history (Gilliland, 1995). It is also very important for non-Native students to study the Native culture. A study conducted with 238 kindergarteners and 239 fifth graders supports this statement (Hirschfelder, Molin & Wakin, 1999).

The study found that most students view Native Americans as being separate from their own way of life (Hirschfelder, Molin & Wakin, 1999). They described Native Americans as living in another place and time far different from the present day. Many students could not give a description of a Native American. Students also have a historic image of Native Americans. They referred to them in the past and not the present day. Both kindergartners and fifth graders described the clothing and activities of the Native Americans as those of the past (Hirschfelder et al., 1999).

The students view Native Americans as warlike and hostile. Almost one-fifth of the kindergartners viewed Native Americans as warlike, mean, or shooting people. However, there was a decrease in this type of response from fifth graders. This indicates a possible improvement in the image of Native Americans held by fifth graders (Hirschfelder et al., 1999).

Another reason supporting Native American education is that most children do not recognize the diversity among Native Americans. Kindergartners and fifth graders spoke of Native Americans in a generalized manner without recognizing the differences among the tribes. Many students gave generalized comments by saying that all Indians wear feathers, hunt, and live in tepees (Hirschfelder et al., 1999). This shows that there is a definite need to teach about the diversity among Native people.

Some fifth graders expressed knowledge of the problems of Native Americans. A
few were aware of prejudice that exists today and made statements that Native Americans
deserved to be treated equally. Despite this, many fifth graders “do not identify positive or
negative feelings toward American Indians” (Hirschfelder et al., 1999, p. 6). To aid
students in gaining positive feelings toward Native Americans, materials should be chosen
that present an accurate image of Indian heritage. (Hirschfelder et al., 1999).

This study confirms that teaching about the Native American culture is essential.
Stereotypes of Native Americans are devastating especially to Native children. If non-
Native students are not presented with accurate information, they will be deprived of the
“richness of Native history and culture” (Hirschfelder et al., 1999, p. 239). Students raised
with these stereotypes will grow up to become adults that hold the same stereotypes. It
will be difficult for these adults to take the social and political problems of Native
Americans seriously (Hirschfelder et al., 1999).

One way to educate students about the Native American culture is through
multicultural literature written about Native Americans. Multicultural literature is defined
as “literature that focuses on specific cultures by highlighting and celebrating their culture
and historical perspectives, traditions and heritage, language and dialects, and experiences
and lifestyles” (Diamond & Moore, 1995). Multicultural literature allows students to
travel to lands that may seem different than their own (Barta & Grindler, 1996).

Multicultural literature serves a number of purposes. It provides students with
information and knowledge about a specific cultural group (Taylor, 2000). It heightens
respect for individuals from different cultures. It also acknowledges the contributions
cultural groups have made to society. Through multicultural literature, students are
exposed to different cultural groups other than their own (Barta & Grindler, 1996).
Students will recognize differences among the groups, but they will also begin to see similarities that different cultural groups hold (Hillard, 1995). Through multicultural literature, "teachers and students can gain insights into the lives, experiences, hearts, and minds of others whose backgrounds differ from their own" (Taylor, 2000, p. 26).

The selection of quality multicultural literature is very important. Good multicultural literature has many aspects in common. Before examining these, it must be determined that the literature meets the criteria for quality children's literature regardless of content (Hillard, 1995). The literature should be interesting to the students. If it is interesting, the students will be more motivated to read. It should also be at the appropriate readability level for the students. Students should be able to read it easily enough to comprehend the content (Gilliland, 1995). Collections of literature should also include a variety of genres for the students to be exposed to (Taylor, 2000).

After quality children's literature has been selected, it can be examined to determine if it is quality literature written about Native Americans. The first step in examining multicultural literature is to ensure that it is culturally and historically authentic and accurate. The setting, theme, characters, illustrator, and author must all be considered when determining this (Taylor, 2000). "If non-Native children are to develop an appreciation for the Native culture and its contributions and are to learn to accept their Indian neighbors as friends and equals, then the books they read must be realistic enough so that students can see the relationship to the Native people with whom they are acquainted" (Gilliland, 1995, p. 153).

The setting should represent the environment of Native Americans of the specific time, place, or situation. Factual information about the specific Native American tribe
should be accurate in detail. Contemporary settings should also describe the present situations of Native Americans accurately (Diamond & Moore, 1995).

When examining the theme, there are several points to consider. The message of the piece of literature should be realistic. The literature must be clear of all stereotypes. Themes developed in the story should be consistent with the values and beliefs, customs and traditions, needs and conflicts of the culture” (Diamond & Moore, 1995, p.45). Any social issues or problems related to the culture should be treated realistically and accurately. Simplifying these for the students may lead to a “watering down” of the literature (Diamond & Moore, 1995).

Characters should authentically reflect the Native American tribe being represented. They should portray the unique experiences of the cultural group, based on everyday experiences, language, family life, and other aspects of the culture. A balance of good and evil should be portrayed by the characters (Diamond & Moore, 1995).

Illustrations also need to be examined for authenticity and accuracy. If the illustrations are not accurate, misconceptions will be conveyed to the students even though the information may be accurate. Illustrations should authentically depict the time, location, and tribe. For example, the Hopi should not be shown living in longhouses because they lived in Pueblos. An illustration of this would contain inaccurate information regarding the specific Native American tribe (Gilliland, 1995). It is important that all illustrations or photographs contain images that reflect the culture of the specific tribe.

When evaluating multicultural literature, the author must be examined. If the author is not a member of the specific Native American tribe, you must find out what qualifies the author to write the book (Taylor, 2000). Many problems concerning Native
American literature can be eliminated if literature written by Native Americans is chosen. The attitude of the author must also be considered. Even though the information may be accurate, the author might reveal negative attitudes toward Native Americans without realizing it. The author's vocabulary in the story often brings out the author's attitude (Gilliland, 1995).

After examining the authenticity and accuracy of the literature, one needs to determine if the literature portrays Native American values. This includes looking at whether the values are interpreted in terms of Native Americans or non-Natives. If people are only respected when they get ahead in the white society, the values are being interpreted in terms of non-Natives. In some literature, Native Americans will be given the same values as non-Natives. The author may not take into account the differences Native Americans hold about time, family life, nature, and spiritual life (Gilliland, 1995).

Native Americans should be portrayed positively in literature. The literature should foster a positive image of Native Americans. After reading a piece of literature, Native children should hold positive feelings about their heritage. Non-native children should gain a respect and understanding for the Native culture. When selecting multicultural literature, however, one needs to be careful not to be so politically correct that the meaning of the literature is lost. Some historical aspects of Native American life might not be seen in a positive light, but it is historically accurate and important that students read about it (Hillard, 1995).

When selecting multicultural literature, the language is a very important aspect to consider. Language found in the text should not be degrading or offensive to the specific cultural group. Vocabulary, dialect, patterns, style, and rhythm of speech should reflect
that of the specific cultural group. It should be natural, and words in other languages should be used correctly (Diamond & Moore, 1995). Words such as savage, squaw, buck, and papoose should be avoided (Hirschfelder et al., 1999).

**Literature Written About Native Americans**

A lot of multicultural literature written about Native Americans is considered to be traditional literature. Through oral tradition these stories have been passed down from one generation to another. *How Turtle's Back was Cracked* (Ross, 1995) tells the story of two friends, Possum and Turtle. A wolf was trying to steal their persimmons, but Possum puts a stop to this. Turtle becomes convinced that he saved the day not Possum. This book teaches the lesson of what can happen if a person becomes too boastful of himself. The author, Ross, had been familiar with this story from a very young age. She found written sources of the legend, and her version grew out of years of retelling the story (Ross, 1995).

*The Mud Pony* (Cohen, 1988) is an ancient boy-hero story told among the Pawnee Indians. This story "exhibited the Pawnee belief that no matter how lowly one's origin, the path of honor is open through adherence to virtues such as constancy and a humble spirit" (Cohen, 1988). *The Mud Pony* tells the story of a young boy who longed for a horse of his own. He made a pony out of mud and treated it as if it was real. One morning he awakes, and the pony has come to life. With the pony, Mother Earth, hard work, and determination, this poor boy earns a place of honor as chief of his tribe.

Joseph Bruchac is of Abenaki Indian origin. When he writes a retelling of a story, he compares written versions with oral versions. Then, he writes his own telling of the story. In *Gluskabe and the Four Wishes* (Bruchac, 1995), he retells a traditional story of
the Wabanaki people of New England. Gluskabe is a culture hero of the Western Abenaki people. Gluskabe and his grandmother lived on Earth before human beings. He is often a helper to the Great Spirit. In this story, Gluskabe lives on an island far away and will grant one wish to anyone who visits. Four men set out to find Gluskabe. Each has a very different wish. By telling what happens to each man, this story teaches an important lesson about greed and selfishness.

*On the Road of Stars* (Bierhorst, 1994) is a collection of Native American night poems and sleep charms from many different tribes. "Sleep magic is one of the gentler arts practiced by American Indian poets and song makers" (Bierhorst, 1994). The poems were written to soothe, heal, bring dreams, and make sleep irresistible. The poems are beautiful, and the language is very calm and soothing.

For Native Americans, the oral tradition is sacred. Children learn about their heritage through stories, songs, and prayers passed down from their elders. *Dancing Tepees* (Sneve, 1989) is a collection of poems that reflect the theme of youth. Many of the selections have been passed down from generation to generation. Others were written by contemporary Native American poets, who as children "learned to respect the power of the spoken word" (Sneve, 1989).

"It takes a lot more courage to make a friend sometimes than it does to make an enemy" (Bruchac, 1997, p. 74). These are the words of Danny Bigtree's father in *Eagle Song* (Bruchac, 1997). Danny has always been very proud of his Native American heritage, but when he moves to New York City this changes. Kids tease him at school and make fun of being a Native American. After dealing with a tough obstacle, Danny begins to believe and live by his father's words. In *Eagle Song*, Bruchac confronts Native
American stereotypes in an honest and realistic manner. This is a wonderful book for non-Native children because it tells a story from a different cultural perspective than their own. *Eagle Song* also teaches a lesson that stereotyping and teasing is not acceptable. It is also a great book for Native children because it shows them that they may not be the only one being made fun of because of their heritage.

*The Long March* (Fitzpatrick, 1998) is a wonderful work of literature written about a young Choctaw named Choona. Fitzpatrick does a fantastic job capturing Choona’s feelings in the story. Choona is unsure if he wants to help contribute to the relief of the Irish Potato Famine. He thinks his people should not help because no one helped them during the long march. After his grandmother tells the complete story of the long march, he rethinks his position and begins to think like a man. In preparation for this story, Fitzpatrick traveled from Ireland to Oklahoma interviewing historians and Choctaw elders. Gary WhiteDeer says she has taken Choctaw history and given it “the breath of life” (Fitzpatrick, 1998).

*Red Bird* (Mitchell, 1996) portrays a young girl who embraces her Native American heritage. Every September, Katie and her family attend a powwow represented by the Northeast tribes. Katie is a member of the Nanticoke tribe. She looks forward to the powwow where she is known by her Native American name Red Bird. She enjoys wearing traditional regalia and participating in the celebration. This is a wonderful book because it portrays a present day Native American child that still celebrates the traditional ways. It shows the reader that Native Americans are still alive today and that they live just as everyone else does.

*The Chinook People* (Ross, 1999) is an informational book about the Chinook.
While writing this book, Ross consulted with Gary Johnson, Chinook Cultural Officer of the tribe. *The Nez Perce* (Osinski, 1988) is an informational book about the Nez Perce tribe of the northwest region. Both of these books contain accurate and authentic information about the tribe, such as the history, housing, food, art, clothing, and modern life. The photographs depict Native Americans of the past and present. The text is simple and easy to understand. Both books would be appropriate for the primary grades.

*The Haida* (Bial, 2001) is an informational book about the Haida of the northwest region. It contains information about the tribe’s history, dress, villages, food, and clothing. I like this book because it also contains information that can often be hard for children to find. It includes a section about the Haida language and notable people from the tribe. I believe this book would be appropriate for the upper elementary grades and above. It has detailed information, and the text may be difficult for some younger readers.

*The Oneida* (McLester & Torres, 2001) includes the same type of information as the previous books mentioned. The text is nicely organized for elementary students. The authors chose key historical events to discuss rather than giving a detailed history. Words that may be new are highlighted and can be found in the glossary. The photographs capture past and present Oneida, authentic longhouses, and arts and crafts. The authors also talk about the contributions the Oneida have made to today’s society.

*Inuits* (Harper, 2000) is an informational book about the Inuit people. Readers will learn about the land and climate of the Arctic, hunting, travel, the role of men and women, and animals found in the Arctic. The information found in this book is accurate. Information about the effects settlers had on the Inuit is given matter of factly. There are very vivid, beautiful photographs of the Arctic land and animals. Many pictures also show
present day Inuit children.

_North American Indian Games_ (Anderson, 2000) is a unique book about Native American games. Native Americans played many different types of games ranging from physical activities to gambling and games of chance. The author includes good explanations of how to play the games. I particularly like how Anderson linked each game to a different Native American legend. It is also interesting to read about the games that originated from traditional Native American games. The photographs show present day Native Americans playing the games. Photographs of traditional game equipment are also included in the book.

“If you really got to know an Indian, you’d realize that person was just a normal human being,” says Shawnee Ford (Krull, 1995, p. 10). _One Nation, Many Tribes_ (Krull, 1995) does this by interviewing two Native American children. Thirza Defoe is half Ojibwa and half Oneida. Shawnee Ford is mixed American Indian. Both are very proud of their Native American heritage. Thirza and Shawnee attend the Milwaukee Indian Community School in Southern Wisconsin. Along with academic classes, students also learn about their heritage. Both children enjoy dancing. Thirza is a solo hoop dancer, and Shawnee is a grass dancer. This is a wonderful book that shows Native American children learning to embrace both of the cultures they live in.

_Totem Pole_ (Hoyt-Goldsmith, 1990) is about David and his father. David’s family belongs to the Eagle Clan of the Tsimshian tribe. David and his father share an important bond through their Native American heritage. David’s father has passed down the Tsimshian songs, dances, legends, and history to him. He is also teaching David the art of woodcarving. Goldsmith does a fantastic job blending David’s present day life with
information about Tsimshian history. This book shows children that they can and should be proud of their family’s history.

*Children of the Tlingit* (Staub, 1999) is an informational book about the present day life of Tlingit children. Readers will learn about how children keep the Tlingit traditions in their everyday lives. This is a wonderful book because it shows Native American children taking part in traditional Tlingit celebrations and present day past times such as basketball and baseball. This book helps non-Native children realize that Native Americans are still present today and that they live like everyone else.

Powwows are very important celebrations for Native Americans. They come together to celebrate their Native American heritage and meet relatives and friends. *Celebrating the Powwow* (Kalman, 1997) gives information about different aspects of the powwow. It gives a glimpse into the time spent preparing before the powwow. Kalman also includes detailed descriptions of men and women’s regalia. It explains types of dances and instruments that can be seen at a powwow. The illustrations capture the elaborate detail of the regalia and the seriousness of the dancers.

In *Eagle Drum: On the Powwow Trail with a Young Grass Dancer* (1994), Crum follows nine-year-old Louise Pierre on the powwow trail. Louis is a member of the Pend Orielle tribe in Montana. “I almost can’t remember a time when I wasn’t a dancer,” Louis says (Crum, 1994, p. 11). He has a passion for dancing and his Native American heritage. He has learned about the traditions of the Pend Orielle tribe from his grandfather. The photographs in this book are beautiful. They capture the beauty of the powwow, regalia, and dances. They also capture Louis’s love for the powwow.

The study of the Native American culture is important for all students. It is part of
the Social Studies curriculum for all schools. Multicultural literature is one way to enhance the curriculum when teaching about Native Americans. I believe the literature discussed represents quality multicultural children’s literature. By reading these books, I feel children will gain an understanding and appreciation for the Native American culture.
References


