Native American Perspectives in Children’s Literature

Introduction:

If you ever mention the term Native American in my kindergarten classroom, you would think that their only experience and knowledge of the subject comes from one location; Disney’s Pocahontas. The children talk about living in teepees, fighting with the white settlers, and being friends with various animals. If it is a good day, the conversation may stretch to an understanding that nature is important to the culture, but it does not go beyond that. The children are fascinated by the topic of “Indians”, but know little to nothing about the people or cultures. I chose this topic because I want my students to know and understand the cultural and historical misrepresentations that may be presented in children’s literature, and therefore explore the realities of historical and modern Native American life.

Statement:

I plan on teaching this unit to a diversified kindergarten audience. However, the unit can be adapted in length and depth to support the needs of a third or fourth grade classroom. Many people, youth and adult, have very limited and inaccurate depictions of Native American people and their history. During this unit, I want to cover the inaccuracies and myths presented in various forms in children’s literature, and the historical impact of these mixed conceptions. I want to begin this unit by focusing on the current images and phrases that children use to describe Native Americans. Through this, I can get an accurate measure of the children’s’ thinking and tailor the unit to best counter their thinking. I will be focusing on comparing and contrasting the images and thinking presented in older, biased texts with those of accurate and unbiased texts. Since the Native American presence is nationwide, the unit will have a broad
geographical focus. At the end of the unit, the students will be examining and discussing the importance of the Native American people of today.
Bibliography:


- This is an animated film that illustrates the discovery and search of the “New World” by Capt. John Smith and a band of English sailors as they look for riches to take back to England. When the ship lands, they encounter Chief Powhatan, Pocahontas, and the tribe. The film depicts some of the historical issues of the time period, and is said to be more “politically correct” than other versions. I would use this film as an introduction to the topic. It is a familiar resource for the students, and will help highlight the source of many of their misconceptions. The film will also be a common reference point as we learn about the realities and fallacies embedded in texts.


- This resource is a children’s picture book. It is a biography of Native American athlete Jim Thorpe, focusing on how his boyhood education set the stage for his athletic achievements which gained him international fame and Olympic gold medals. The included author’s notes and timeline detail Thorpe’s life after college. This is an important resource for children to understand the presence of American Indians in the area of professional athletics. This resource could be used as a read aloud or as a text choice for students.


- This source is a children’s book about a Cheyenne boy named Young Bull who is taken from his parents and sent to attend the off-reservation Indian school so that he can learn to become a part of the white world. This could be used as a read aloud to demonstrate the struggle of Native Americans to maintain their cultural and traditional beliefs while adapting to the world around them.

- These resources are a series of books that focus on individual Native American tribes. Each book covers the span of the tribe’s existence, from early beginnings to modern day and includes historical conflicts of the tribe that impacted their culture and beliefs today. The books also use photographs whenever possible, which helps to avoid stereotypes and fallacies sometimes present in illustrations. These books could be used as references for the children.


- This source is a children’s picture book, written by an Ojibwa writer and a Ponca artist, that tells the story of the young Shoshone woman who traveled west with Lewis and Clark. There are gaps in the story, but the author remains faithful to the historical record. In an afterword, the author distinguishes between what is certain and what is under speculation. A time line, a map, and a brief bibliography follow the story. This source could be used to inform the students about a young woman who played such an integral role in American History through her experiences with Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery.


- This source is a children’s book about a little boy who decides to pretend that he is a Native American child for the day. The text and pictures offer examples of the stereotyping of the culture that is present in today’s society. This source could be used in conjunction with other text to facilitate a compare and contrast demonstration, or could be used as a read aloud to assess the students’ prior knowledge about what things they believe are true and untrue about a typical “Indian” child.


- This website is a database of the federally recognized and unrecognized tribes in the United States. The site contains links, listed in alphabetical order, to pages that have either been set up by the nations themselves, or to pages devoted to a particular nation. The pages are differentiated with a drum symbol indicating whether the pages are maintained by Indian Nations or contain primarily information about specific nations, but provided by an outside resource. This resource could be used with the students to learn about the history and modern life of specific tribes, as well as to check the validity of students’ ideas.

- This resource is a series of easy reader books on American Indian tribes. These books offer introductions to the histories and cultures of the different peoples they treat. Of particular value is the care taken in each book to positively show each tribe and its people and culture as survivors in the late 20th century. This resource could be used by the teacher or students to learn about the individual tribal nations today.


- This source discusses the most glaring problems with past practices in teaching Native American studies in an elementary classroom. It also includes suggestions for improving and updating instruction to make it more accurate in today's world. At the end of the article, there is a list of suggested titles for the teacher and the students. This resource could be used by a teacher in the beginning stages of planning a unit of Native American Issues.


- This source is a series of lesson plans on the images of Native Americans in present day. Teachers use photo essays and other texts to introduce students to Native children and their families, thereby countering the idea that Native people no longer exist. National standards, an instructional plan, and the required resources are included in the plans, as well as other related sources. These plans are a good way to introduce the topic, or as an ending assessment of the unit.


- This is an ERIC article that is written by a Pueblo Indian who studies and works in the field of early childhood education. This resource addresses typical stereotypes that children see in television, movies, and children's literature. The source also provides teaching suggestions, positive strategies to use, and practices to avoid. This could be used by the teacher as a reference of issues that should be addressed in the unit.

- This source teaches about racial stereotypes and provides an introduction to Native American history through the narration of Native American children. The DVD also includes teaching notes from the original teacher guide and downloadable photos that can be printed for use in the classroom. The DVD is very short and is appropriate for all age levels. This source could be used as an introduction to the topic of study, and can be reviewed at the end of the study to help students evaluate the shift in their thinking.

Shaw, Oran. “Native American Culture of Dance”. Native American Dance Exhibition, Elizabeth Starr Academy, Richmond, IN, January, 2012.

- Oran Shaw is a parent of two of the students at Elizabeth Starr Academy, and a member of the Pueblo tribal nation. He volunteers as a guest speaker, or as a demonstrator of tribal dances. He is a resource to have speak to the children about the Native American influences on modern culture, as well as instruct the children on the meanings of tribal dance. Mr. Shaw is also willing to speak to children about the history of his tribe, and address common misconceptions.


- This resource is a children’s book published in cooperation of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. It is a biography of an eleven-year-old Osage boy from northeast Oklahoma. The text follows Christopher and his family in life on the Osage Reservation and follows him as he learns the stories of Osage ancestors, including those who first learned to drive cars and pilot airplanes. This is in excellent resource to illustrate the relationship between historical and modern Native American life.


- This is a collection of poems written by Native American children. The poems illustrate a wide variety of topics, some historical and some modern, and are told in child-friendly language. This resource could be used as a collection for students to explore, or could be pulled apart and different poems used as an introduction to a variety of topics.
This resource is a museum of American Indian art, historical artifacts, and cultural objects. The museum offers a variety of interactive exhibitions and historical collections. Classroom tours of the museum and American Indian storytelling are among the special programs offered. This resource could be used prior to the unit as a reference for the teacher, and can also be used as a field trip for the students at any time during the unit.
Conclusion:

As I have studied this topic in preparation to teach it in my classroom, I have learned far more than I expected to have learned. When I began, I knew that there were many cultural biases present in children’s literature, and that these biases would have to be addressed with students in order for them to gain an accurate understanding of Native American influence and culture. However, I was not prepared for the enormity of the task at hand.

Native Americans make up less than one percent of the total U.S. population but represent half the languages and cultures in the nation. The term "Native American" includes over 500 different groups and reflects great diversity of geographic location, language, socioeconomic conditions, and the continuation of traditional spiritual and cultural practices. Sadly, most of the prepared teaching materials and children’s literature available present a generalized image of Native American people with little or no regard for differences that exist from tribe to tribe.

I also learned that even the most celebrated authors can fall into the trap of perpetuating the stereotypes. It was actually very easy to find examples of the stereotypical “Indian” present in children’s literature from many different time periods. What was far more difficult was finding texts for teachers and students that were free from those labels and prejudice. While current publishers have strived to support a more complete and accurate picture, there is still much work to be done.

In short, I learned that our current population of children, as well as their parents, is indeed very ignorant when it comes to understanding the historical and cultural influence of the Native American people and their place in our modern world. It is our job, as teachers, to teach them to recognize these misconceptions and teach them the truth about Native Americans. We must be selective and proactive about the materials that our students encounter, and make sure
that we are presenting them with the clearest, most accurate picture of the Native American world.