

# Selecting Diverse Resources of Native American Perspective for the Curriculum Center: Children's Literature, Leveled Readers, and Social Studies Curriculum

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## Abstract

Biased and inaccurate information about Native Americans continue in children's resources and remain in many of today's curriculum centers. While Native American students remain a minority in schools, accurate information is vital for understanding contemporary society and our history by both Native and non-Native students. Many states including Washington State are creating tribal sovereignty curriculum and adding tribal perspectives to their state curriculum. Valuable print and digital resources and sources of continuing selection assistance are suggested to increase the holdings of today's curriculum center in three areas: children's literature, leveled readers and social studies curriculum.

## Introduction

*"The Curriculum Center is full of bias and misrepresentations of Native People,"*  
*"My children's favorite books reflecting their Native culture are not available in the Curriculum Center"*

The American Indian studies director at my university, like myself a former K-12 educator, shared these observations with me about our Curriculum Center when I arrived on campus five years ago. This interview caught my attention. While many faculty I interviewed remarked on the outdated look and content of the Curriculum Center, she was willing to say that we were missing an entire perspective and that the items we did have were inaccurate. She was correct. My first evaluation of the collection showed glaring gaps and the dated items she mentioned. These two issues are a common dual problem in children's literature collections and school curriculum about Native Americans: misrepresentation or inaccuracies in the current resources, and gaps or missing key accurate resources (Almeida, 1996). It became one of my priorities to identify and select the best Native American youth materials I could find. Pacific Northwest tribes, both Northwest Coastal and Inland Plateau in Washington State, are my primary focus but because teaching United States history involves so many tribes and regions, every curriculum center needs quality resources with tribal perspective from tribes throughout the continent including Pacific Northwest tribes. Many of the references and selected resources list will assist other centers in their quest to provide accurate national and regional information.

This project to enrich our center's resources with more Native American materials heightened my awareness of the discrepancies in education of Native youth and current pedagogy of anti-bias curriculum and culturally relevant curriculum (Griffin, 2000). A compilation of frequent misconceptions about American Indians provides answers to context in *Do All Indians Live in Tipis?: Questions and Answers from the National Museum of American Indian* (National, 2007). This book is a good entry for understanding complexity among tribes and the many fallacies that remain among non-Natives about American Indians issues. Other resources provide more details (Hirschfelder, Molin, & Wakim, 1998; Ongtooguk & Dybdahl, 2008; Pewewardy, 1998) Dialogue in our state legislature, education departments, and with regional tribes is producing a new curriculum and awareness of the issues (Edmo, 2008; RCW, 2006; Where, 2008) that is mirrored in other states as well (Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2003; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002; Ngai & Allen, 2007; Smiley & Sather, 2009). My strategic plan for increasing accurate Native Peoples' curriculum materials comprises three areas of the curriculum center collection:

- Children's literature
- Leveled readers in reading series
- Social studies curriculum.

Each area of the collection needed culturally relevant materials with a Native perspective and the voice of tribes, both locally and nationally. Current materials were evaluated using criteria developed by experts in tribal history and children's literature

(10, 1998; Almeida, 1996; Anthropology, n.d.; Seale & Slapin, 2005).

### **Native People**

One of the first considerations was the nomenclature to use. Libraries use the subject heading “Indians of North America” or specific tribes for most materials. However, the preferred term for an individual of Native American heritage is their name and the tribal affiliation name acknowledged by the tribal member (Pewewardy, 1998). With over 500 tribes in the United States, this can be a problem when referring to people from multiple tribes or mixed tribe heritage. While there is no consensus on group nomenclature acceptable to all Native People, the term “Native American” tends to be used in K-12 settings and “American Indian” in higher education. In Canada, the term “First Nation” and “Native People” is acceptable across many tribes. I will use several of these terms interchangeably or in accordance with the resource’s use of the term.

Both Native and non-Native students need to read, see and hear accurate representations of Native People in American history and contemporary life no matter where they live (Apthorp, Kinner, & Enriquez-Olmos, 2005; Edmo, 2008; Ngai & Allen, 2007), so it is vital for curriculum centers to provide culturally relevant resources. Both local tribal materials and resources representing major tribes throughout North America are necessary. While the statistics about American Indians can be confusing because of the difference between self-identified and tribal-identified people, recent data suggests that 1% of the U. S. population identifies in the census as Native American (State, 2008). Currently there are only three states (Kentucky, Georgia and Tennessee) with no federally recognized American Indian tribes (Department, 2008; Frantz, 1999). While 92% of American Indians who live on reservations are west of the Mississippi, more than half (54%) of the total population live in urban areas including many in the Eastern seaboard (Frantz, 1999, p. 87). Throughout North America, there are many Native People on and off reservations.

The relatively small number of American Indians in the total population of North America does not represent the importance of all Americans understanding Native culture due to historical significance and contemporary sovereignty rights. Our nation’s agreements with tribes predate and are recognized in the U. S. Constitution, and there are many misunderstandings in U.S. society about Indian rights through treaties and law (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002; National, 2007; Ngai & Allen, 2007; Where, 2008). Some regions of the country will place greater emphasis on Native issues because of their history and current population. A Pacific Northwest regional report shows that Native youth in today’s schools are the largest minority population in Alaska and Montana and that Washington State, Idaho, and Oregon have a student Indian population of at least 3 % (Smiley & Sather, 2009). These numbers indicate a need for educational materials across the continent with particular emphasis in the West. My emphasis will be on national concerns as seen through the regional examples.

### **Cultural Bias in Curriculum**

Bias in instructional material for children has been recognized since a seminal article in 1965 by Nancy Larrick, *The All-White World of Children’s Books* (1965). Her five year analysis of 5,000 children’s books centered on contemporary African Americans but it became a call to explore bias of Native American in children’s literature as well. The *Council of Interracial Books for Children* produced an influential brochure checklist “10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism” in 1979. It remains the basis for book evaluation of bias today with almost all guides adapting that initial checklist (Ten, 1998). Washington State law has been specific about evaluating bias in content in instructional material since 1974. This commitment was recently reiterated in a new version of the manual *Washington models for the evaluation of bias content in instructional materials: Guidelines for identifying bias* (2009) and the general instructional materials guide (Washington, 2008). Inaccurate Native images and stereotypes seem pervasive in American culture (Hirschfelder, Molin & Wakim, 1999; McCarty, 2008; Mihesuah, 1996;

Pewewardy, 1998; Ongtooguk & Dybdahl, 2008; Unlearning, 1981) and can be seen in popular culture and media including children's literature. Stereotypes of Native Americans as only living in the past in historical clothing and housing contributes to a lack of understanding of modern day American Indians, including urban Indians. These misconceptions need to be countered with accurate representations. As accurate materials with tribal perspective become increasingly available in print, oral, and web based resources; curriculum centers should provide resources that broaden our teachers' perspectives and provide materials to teach all children. Resources in children's literature, leveled readers and social studies curriculum in the curriculum center needs to be evaluated for misrepresentation and gaps in knowledge.

### **I: Children's Literature**

One major area of most curriculum centers is children's literature. The Cooperative Center for Children's Books not only collects children's literature but also monitors the output of children literature with ethnic perspectives and ethnic authors including Native Americans. By reviewing this information on their website, it is easy to see the trends (Children's, 2010). Statistics are available since 1994 in two categories: books by American Indians and books about American Indians. The latest figures (2010) show a paltry 22 titles about North American Indians and only 9 of those by Native American authors. This is from a total of approximately 5,000 annual children literature trade books. Previous years have some fluctuation, but Native American books remain negligible in overall publishing. The statistics in general are dismal, with a substantial reduction in both books and books by Native authors last year. Making sure these books are selected is one reason curriculum center directors should seek newly published material. Since many titles come from small or regional presses, a diligent search for those sources is required. Since 2006, the American Indian Library Association (<http://www.ailanet.org/activities/youthlitaward.htm>) bi-annually awards books in three categories (early, middle, and young adult) (2010, 2010). These book suggestions start the process of acquiring great titles for several ages. More libraries and people

purchasing quality Native American materials produces economic incentive to publish more diverse titles (McElmeel, 2004). Knowing about quality resources has been an obstacle in the past (Almeida, 1996) but this award is a help for children's book selectors.

Two books set the tone for finding and selecting exemplary materials about Native Peoples in children's literature. The first is a specialized bibliography, *A Broken Flute*. Issued in 2005 as a sequel to the ground breaking *Through Indian Eyes* (Slapin & Seale, 1992) created over a decade earlier, *A Broken Flute* is a selection guide, evaluative tool, and learning manual about Native literature including common stereotypes. Unlike other children's literature bibliographies, this work includes titles of books that the authors believe should not be selected and reasons why they should be avoided (Seale & Slapin, 2005) This information is necessary because standard reviewing sources sometimes recommended titles that contain problems with facts or mis-interpretation of tribal knowledge and perspective. *Broken Flute*, through its detailed analysis of titles, also helps education librarians and teachers expand their knowledge about Native Peoples and the variety of culture between tribes while discussing specific authors and titles. It also serves as a valuable selection guide, since it includes less well known authors and publishers.

The second source is a guide on early childhood curriculum, *Lessons from Turtle Island: Native Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms* (Jones & Moomaw, 2002). The authors together model a dialogue approach to blend the Native perspective with early childhood education expertise. The authors' framework gave me an "aha" moment. Native American perspectives were seamlessly integrated into many daily lessons and the curriculum planning. Rather than have a day, a week, or even a month that highlighted Native history and culture through story and activities, the Native perspective was included in most units. Common themes of shoes, families, trees, and additional topics include resources of Native Peoples. Over time, Native educators have developed this strategy of enmeshing Native

People's perspective into existing curriculum (Edmo, 2008). It is a fine example of a combination of theory with practice, with many examples and book lists. These two books are excellent resources to check titles currently in the curriculum center collection, and they are recent enough to serve as a collective development resource as well.

Frequently publishing house and major selection aids do not have knowledgeable staff to review the materials for authenticity (Harvey, Hardjo, & Welborn, 1995; McElmeel, 2004). With over 500 recognized tribes in the United States, it can be difficult to determine tribal authenticity in children's literature. Nevertheless, there are several sources to assist the book selector. A main source for new titles is the bimonthly publication, *MultiCultural Review*. While it is not limited to Native Peoples, it does include current titles with competent reviewers. It is available in print or online by subscription; the current issue is available at the journal's website

(<http://www.mcreview.com>), and it is indexed in four databases (Ulrich, 2010). Debbie Reese's blog *American Indian in Children's Literature* (<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>) augments selection journals with specific categories of new materials to purchase and some to avoid. Her knowledge of children's literature is vast and she is aware of common reviewing errors, so she reviews current children's literature with searchable past postings. Children's literature author, Cynthia Leitich Smith also presents resources on her blog in designated section (Smith, 2010). The organization *Oyate* has a store at its website (<http://oyate.com>) for purchase of Native materials. Specifically searching for Native American resources and checking their perspective is necessary to have quality, accurate materials and these sources help the curriculum center director. The issue of removal of traditional or older children's literature that inaccurately portrays Native Americans remains a topic in children's literature collection maintenance where children are exposed to multiple Native American stereotypes (Harvey, Hardjo & Welborn, 1995; Hirschfelder, Moline & Wakim, 1999; Morgan, 2009; Null, 2003; Pewewardy, 1998; Unlearning, 1981). However, the curriculum center often maintains key titles in the collection because of their historical significance for

other reasons such as winning a major children's literature award. It can be valuable to keep examples for use by faculty and students to learn about stereotypes. The DVD from Rethinking Schools

(<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/ProdDetails.asp?ID=9780942961409>) *Unlearning Indian Stereotypes* based on the Council on Interracial Books for Children's filmstrip and teaching guide is an inexpensive addition to assist in this process (Unlearning 1981). Thus, a children's literature collection at the university may retain copies of titles such as *Little House* books, *Sign of the Beaver*, *Indian in the Cupboard*, *Alligators All Around* and more titles that are critiqued for damaging stereotypes. These books serve an important role of text analysis in the children's literature classroom. With the addition of newer titles and highlighted book lists, most users can find materials for curriculum planning that will be positive and useful for today's youth.

## II. Leveled Readers and Reading Series

As curriculum center director, I cannot make changes in standard reading series, but I can seek supplemental resources that fill in gaps and provide our students and faculty with model examples of diversity in a culturally responsive manner. In Washington State, The Indian Education office worked with tribes to produce a set of leveled readers reflecting the cultures of the Northwest coastal tribes. The beginning text and illustrations on canoe, drum, and hunting and gathering are on a compact disc (Evergreen, 2002). These digital copies include short videos of tribal elders explaining the significance of the three topics. The National Education Association website (Online, 2002-2010) features this curriculum with samples of the videos and the readers on the right side of its culturally responsive web pages (<http://www.nea.org/home/16732.htm>). Other regional and state education departments have produced items now and in the past (Benne, 2004). Our Curriculum Center contains the latest mainstream reading series. They can be evaluated for instructional bias using the checklists provided to help teacher candidates find bias and more culturally relevant materials (Oyate, 2011; Reese, 2011; Slapin & Seale, 2005; Washington, 2009).

The process of teacher candidates evaluating materials for bias is a lifelong professional skill that needs to be developed early. Standard textbooks are one of the key places to begin this process (Almeida, 1996; Gangi, 2008). Jane Gangi examines the many book lists of children's literature that are given as examples in reading instruction textbooks and common manuals. She notes the overall whiteness of the examples, with often only 1% of all book suggestions depicting people of color (2008). The history of using culturally responsive materials for native students is beautifully told in a historical book with excerpts from many readers of the 1930s and 1940s when the Bureau of Indian Affairs made a concerted effort to produce books. While many of the first titles were by non-Native authors associated with reservation schools, examples of illustrations often featured Native illustrators, including many young people (Benes, 2004).

Canada's First Nation people face similar issues to reproduce images and texts of their experiences for beginning readers. Eaglecrest Books (<http://www.eaglecrestbooks.com>) has a leveled reading series that uses common topics and photographic images of First Nation people: fishing, with family, in celebration, and more. The eighty-five titles are available as sets or as individual book titles; they are available in English, French, and Cree languages. Other First Nations in Canada place leveled readers online for free download. Some are in English and French, and many are in the tribe's language.

The increase in teaching tribal languages as part of Native culture creates a need for more leveled readers for beginners of all ages in the Native language (Apthorp, D'Amato & Richardson, 2003). While some books are bilingual, many more are a leveled approach to learning the Native language. Increasingly the tribes or funding sources are posting these resources online for all to use. It is necessary for the curriculum center to provide access to these electronic resources as well as print resources in order to have culturally responsive leveled readers supplementing the standard reading series.

### III. Social Studies Curriculum

The history of North American, particularly United States and Canada, always includes information about American Indians, so there will be information about tribes, conflict, and events such as the Lewis & Clark Expedition in social studies textbooks (Bureau, 1998). History resources, non-fiction books, and social studies curriculum should include tribal perspectives and should provide today's students and teacher candidates with accurate material. Tribal sovereignty is a key concept sometimes misunderstood by teachers and students. Federally recognized tribes are treated as governments within the United States. Many rights and practices of tribes predate the U.S. Constitution, and tribal sovereignty is mentioned in the U.S. Constitution as well (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). Therefore, it is important for curriculum centers to obtain many resources that reflect the best practices for understanding American Indian history and tribal sovereignty.

Many states include tribal history and government in their state social studies standards. In Washington State, Native Peoples' perspective is presented in a tribal sovereignty curriculum, *Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State*, available in 2010 (Edmo, 2008; Meyer, 2010). By state statute (RCW 28A.345.070, 2006), school districts in Washington State are encouraged to incorporate information on tribal history and culture in the social studies curriculum units. This law sets up tribal relationships with schools, acknowledges the achievement gap of Native students, and creates the curriculum about tribal sovereignty and history for both Native and non-Native youth (Edmo, 2007). Other states provide curriculum about their regional tribes on the state education or tribe's website. For a more complete list of digital accessible curriculum see <http://research.ewu.edu/tribal> under the tab state curriculums.

One stellar example is Montana. As a pioneer in this area, with a mandatory curriculum with statewide resources, Montana's Department of Education provides resources and research about tribes' sovereignty and a historical perspectives curriculum. It is especially useful because of its

place-based focus which provides a model for other states. One Montana elementary school did an action research project about its adoption of the curriculum. The subsequent report answers many schools' concerns about adding curriculum and using local tribal members as participants in developing and presenting the curriculum. Non-Native teachers are expected to learn as well prior and during the presentation of the curriculum (Ngai & Allen, 2007). A project at the University of Montana also created rich multimedia resources, both free online sites and inexpensive DVDs that feature interviews with tribal elders about regional history (Oyate, 2011; Regional, 2010).

Alaska is another example of a statewide effort. Alaska provides online resources for the many Inuit, Aleuts, and American Indian perspectives. Their materials on their website *Alaska Native Knowledge Network* (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/>) extend beyond history curriculum into math and science curriculum as well. More tribes, museums, and state departments of education are digitizing resources that will assist the curriculum centers everywhere in providing appropriate materials from across the continent as well as local resources depicting local tribes. The Internet provides access to many resources that in the past would have been considered archival or regional only, but now can be used by today's educators throughout the continent to enhance their own or their students' knowledge of historical and current events from Thanksgiving to fishing rights.

Recent reports clarify the role of education for students who are American Indians. The Washington State example *Where the sun rises: Addressing the Educational Achievement of Native Americans in Washington State* documents the achievement gap in state standardized testing and shares best instructional practices that are culturally relevant (Where, 2008). Its findings are based on many national research projects. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory completed a study of Indians Education Policies in five Northwest Region States: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. By examination of statutes, regulations, and policies of departments of education, this study determined the most frequently selected best practices. The same study

also examined research studies (eleven) about Native students' education nationwide and the recommendations arising from the research. These two available reports are useful for all curriculum centers because of the summary of available research. Several common themes emerged that apply to the type of resources curriculum centers should have available for today's teachers in training. "Native cultures and history are part of school curriculum" is a key Indian education policy in all five Northwest states. Four studies stated that "all teachers are required to have training in Native American cultures and history" (Smiley & Sather, 2009, p. 11).

### Results

Narrowing the achievement gap amongst all students in education is a large part of today's school reform process and Native American students are a sub-group to target with appropriate resources about their history and sovereignty (Griffin, 2000; Ngai & Allen, 2007; Where, 2008). Education libraries and curriculum centers have an opportunity to help address the gap by providing examples of resources for culturally relevant pedagogy.

The inclusion of American Indian materials helps teachers develop a respect and appreciation for Native People's history. Our users can learn how to ask culturally specific questions and learn not to accept standard curriculum materials blindly (Almeida, 1996; Aphorpe, Kinner, & Enriquez-Olmos, 2005; Gangi, 2008). The resources to help all teachers and students understand tribal sovereignty in our current world offers an opportunity to promote the coexistence of democracy and social justice (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2004).

Five years later, Eastern Washington University's Curriculum Center has many more Native Peoples titles (over 400 titles) and research guides to tribal information. I am in the midst of an American Library Association Carnegie-Whitney grant to produce a bibliography of youth resources for the Pacific Northwest Coastal and Inland Plateau tribes. This grant fosters cooperation with statewide tribal educators and libraries including visiting cultural

centers. This bibliography will be placed online for K-12 youth resources to update and expand the Smithsonian's online book lists of K-12 youth resources for all regions of the United States (Anthropology, n.d.). Instruction for children's literature, reading, and social studies classes includes Native People's materials. Displays and events have been created to present the resources. Strategic targeted partnering and constant selection awareness allows highlighting this area of the curriculum center so that the Director of the American Indian Studies program now welcomes bringing her classes and promoting the center in her work as one of our partners.

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### Selected Resources

562 federally recognized tribes Federal Registrar April 2008. <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2008/pdf/E8-6968.pdf>

*Aboriginal schoolbooks*. Nortext. <http://www.nortext.com/schoolbooks/index.html>

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