

Examining Native American Themed Children’s Literature for Use in the Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to analyze Native American themed children’s literature in hopes of finding quality books to use in the educational setting. It is imperative that today’s educators have a wide range of children’s literature represented in their classrooms. Presenting students with stories that include cultural facts from history and the present is essential. Our research questions included making sure Native Americans were positively portrayed, what were the student takeaways from reading the book, and what other corresponding themes were present in the text.

Keywords: children’s literature, Native Americans, culture, elementary education, teacher preparedness.

1. Introduction

Teaching children about different cultures can be very challenging, especially when the culture is not one the teacher is personally familiar with. Teachers want to be sure they are providing their students interesting information that is accurate and culturally appropriate. There is extensive material to delve in to with any culture. The Native American culture can be particularly daunting because there are so many aspects that can be taught. Native Americans have been stereotyped and misunderstood for so long in our culture that it can be very difficult to identify errors; therefore, choosing literature with Native Americans as the subject must be thoughtful and purposeful. Quality Native American children’s literature that tells a good story, is accurate in its information, and culturally appropriate can take time to find but is well worth the effort!

It is important for teachers to take teaching about Native Americans and their culture seriously because of the stereotypes and inaccuracies that are so ingrained in our culture. Native American people are regular people who live regular lives today but many people, especially children, think of Native Americans as people who lived in the past. There is a real movement today to encourage teachers and parents to bring literature in to children’s lives that not only celebrates Native American history but also shows Native Americans in the present, being normal people doing everyday things. In addition, Native American children need to see their people being successful in the real world and not as figments of the past or stereotyped characters in books and television (Reese, 2008).

When planning to teach a unit on a specific subject, it is imperative that a teacher has a collection of literature to go along with the subject. Literature helps children to grasp what they are learning about on a deeper level (Galda, 2010). Choosing good literature to compliment studying the Native American culture should have some guiding questions as well. Are Native Americans positively portrayed in this story? Teachers should read the story to see if the information in the book is accurate and respectful of Native Americans. What will my students learn from this story about the Native American culture? Presenting students with stories that present cultural facts from history and the present is very important. Is there another theme in this story besides just learning about the Native American culture? Choosing books that are enjoyable to read and have a good message should also be a priority because students will not want to pick up the book and read it unless it has good literature value.

2. Background of Research

This project included analyzing seventeen children's books that portrayed the Native American culture in some way. Some books featured Native American characters in the present, others were Native American folktales, and still others claimed to tell the history of Native Americans. It was important to take a close look at children's books that highlight Native American culture because future teachers need quality literature.

Additionally, it is important to be aware of and have representation of as many cultures as possible so that not only are students more culturally aware but that all cultures of students feel welcome and important in the classroom. It is important for a teacher to be familiar with accurate Native American themed children's literature because students need accurate information about the Native American culture. Good literature may gain more student respect for the culture and its influence on our unique American culture, and it will also perk students' interest in learning more. In addition, teachers need a respectable collection of children's literature that features the Native American culture in an accurate and positive fashion to present to their class. Book reviews point out the inaccurate portrayal of Native Americans, and teachers should avoid having those types of books as suggested reading or even in my classroom library. Teachers should also be aware of inaccuracies in popular children's books in order to point those out when the time arises.

3. Literature Review

There are many things to consider when choosing children's literature about Native Americans. Dr. Cathy Gutierrez-Gomez had some suggestions in her article, *Tips for Choosing Culturally Appropriate Books & Resources about Native Americans*. Some things to look for in Native American children's literature are authentic information and images, Native American people from the past and in the present, diversity of the many different tribal nations, respectful language, and positive role models. Dr. Debbie Reese offers some guiding questions, in the same article, to ask while looking for Native American literature. First, does the author/illustrator specify a tribal nation? This shows that the author/illustrator is aware that there are many tribal nations and they are all unique. Second, what is the time period? This helps to make sure there is a mix of historical and present day Native American characters in the literature collection. Is the history accurate? No one has time to check if every fact is accurate but if there are glaring mistakes or reviews by experts about the book, it is worth trying to be aware of any inaccuracies. How does the author/illustrator present gender? Both Native American boys and girls will be reading these stories and it is important for both genders to be represented fairly and accurately. Does the author's word choice indicate bias against Native peoples? Sometimes the vocabulary in a story can tip a reader off as to if the characters are being represented respectfully.

Dr. Debbie Reese is a professor of the American Indian Studies program at University of Illinois and she had more tips for planning and researching lessons about Native Americans in her articles, *"I" Still Isn't For Indian* and *Authenticity and Sensitivity*. First, focus on one tribe or one aspect of the Native American culture instead of trying to cover everything. There are over 500 different tribal groups in the United States today, and they all have unique qualities. Second, be specific when teaching about cultural artifacts and foods. Not all tribes had the same style of dress or ate the same types of foods. Discussing the differences can be interesting as well! Third, teach about modern Native Americans as well as historical Native Americans. This teaches students that Native Americans are still a culture living among us instead of a culture that is extinct or non-existent. And finally, present students with material that shows Native Americans doing everyday activities. This way students can see that although there are things that are special about the Native American culture, Native Americans are regular people just like them. With these tips in mind, a teacher can pinpoint more accurately what is it they want to teach their students about the Native American culture. Finding material may not be as overwhelming as it was before with these goals in mind.

Debbie Reese also suggests that for a book to be deemed accurate and appropriate it must be reviewed by at least one expert outside of the publishing company. In her article titled, *Authenticity & Sensitivity: Goals for writing and reviewing with Native American themes*, Debbie Reese discusses Ann Rinaldi's book, *My Heart Is on the Ground: The Diary of Nannie Little Rose, A Sioux Girl*. Within the Native American community, the book was not well received because of tribal inaccuracies and insensitivity towards the Native American culture. Rinaldi's book was reviewed by an expert, who warned the publishing company, Scholastic, that there were parts of the book that would offend the Native American community but her suggestions were ignored!

Teachers need to strive to be aware of reviews like this so that they know what kind of literature they are presenting to their students. Students can enjoy a story, but they should also be taught how to read with caution and awareness. Betsy Hearne also had excellent advice on finding accurate children's literature in her article, *Cite the Source: Reducing Cultural Chaos in Picture Books*. Her advice could be used for reviewing multicultural literature, and we relied heavily on her tips.

Hearne demands that authors and publishers include some sort of source and/or background note to give their story some cultural context. When authors show where they received their information or where their folktale began, readers can better understand the cultural context the story is coming from. "Knowledge can only deepen our reading and listening, especially of stories that grow from unfamiliar traditions" (Hearne, 1993).

4. Research Questions

We used tips and suggestions from experts in the field of Native American literature to form three guiding questions. First, are Native Americans positively portrayed in this story? We paid attention to characteristics the author gave characters and decided if the characters had personalities that students could make a positive connection with or not. Second, what will students learn from this story about the Native American culture? Whether the story is historical fiction, non-fiction, or realistic fiction, we wanted to pay attention to what kind of information students would learn from reading the books. Finally, is there another theme in this story besides learning about Native American culture? We thought that a really good story would not only teach students about the Native American culture but might also teach them another idea or theme to add to their connections with the story and the real world.

5. Research Methods

Before we began collecting books for our children's literature collection, we first researched what other experts in the field of Native American children's literature and what ideas we should be aware of. We read about what authors have done well and what the Native American community would like to have seen done better. We then searched for books at local libraries and browsed the children's literature section for Native American books that we thought would be good for our collection. Then, we researched recently published Native American themed children's literature and ordered those books through the lending program at the university library. Once we had the collection together, we read all of the books once through without really thinking too much about the research. We wanted to get a feel for the books in a way that students would probably go about reading the book. Was the story in itself a good story? How were the illustrations? Was the book enjoyable, regardless of our research? This helped us to decide if we would want the story in our collection. Immediately, we were able to weed out a few books from the start just based on whether we thought they were pleasurable to read. It is important to offer students books that will not only expand their worlds but other books that will excite their passion to read!

After weeding out a few books from the collection that we felt were not the quality of literature that we wanted to focus on, we then read each book again and analyzed them against our three guiding questions. We made notes as we read the story and then answered the three guiding questions at the end of the story. We then created a group of the strongest stories from the collection that positively answered all three of our questions. Within that group of the best stories, two categories that we felt should be included in a classroom literature selection: stories about present-day Native Americans and stories about Native Americans from the past.

6. Results

The best book from our collection, that we believe would spark students' imaginations and emotions and teach them something was *Crossing Bok Chitto: A Choctaw Tale of Friendship & Freedom* by Tim Tingle. This historical fiction picture book tells the story of two friends; one is a Choctaw girl and one is a black slave boy growing up in Mississippi along the Bok Chitto River. This story shows Native Americans in a positive light by showing their kindness, bravery, and true friendship. Students can learn about how the Choctaw Indians helped slaves run away to freedom in Mississippi. They can also learn about Choctaw traditions such as marriage and storytelling. There are other themes in this story that add to the students' literature experience such as the themes of friendship and courage. In keeping with Betsy Hearne's suggestions of citing sources, we really appreciated Tim Tingle's author notes in the back of the book; "Choctaws Today: Two Prosperous Nations, One Strong People" and "A Note on Choctaw Storytelling."

Both of these notes added facts to the story that clarify background for students and give them more information about what they just read. In our historical fiction category, *Crazy Horse's Vision* by Joseph Bruchac was an excellent version of Crazy Horse's biography as a young man. This story focuses on the early years of Crazy Horse's life. It shows how brave and generous Crazy Horse and the Lakota tribe were. Students can learn about the famous chief, Crazy Horse, and what his life might have been like. Joseph Bruchac's author note and the S.D. Nelson's illustrator's note add extra information for students to learn more about the subject. Besides learning about Crazy Horse's life, students can learn about Lakota Indian traditions like vision quests. They can also learn about some of the injustices done to the Native Americans by the U.S. government.

Shin-chi's Canoe by Nicola I. Campbell was another excellent story from the historical fiction genre. This book tells the story of two Native American siblings who are taken from their family in the late 1800s to an Indian residential school. It is an excellent example of Native American literature for children because it is written by a Native American author so the characters are positively and authentically portrayed. Students can learn what it was like to attend Indian residential school. Readers can really understand how painful it was to be away from family and language and culture for so long. There wasn't really another theme in the story, but the author's note had excellent information that could really inform students about life for Native Americans in the 1800s.

The last story that is highly recommend in the historical fiction genre was really more closely connected to non-fiction because the picture book was written about a real person, based on her own writings. Gaps were liberally filled in by the authors, Gina Capaldi and Q.L. Pearce. *Red Bird Sings: The Story of Zitkala-Sa, Native American, Author, Musician, and Activist*, was a great picture book for students to take another look at Indian residential schools in the 1800s. The story shows the harsh reality of how many Native Americans who attended Indian residential schools did not become successful adults. It does show how one girl, Red Bird or Zitkala-Sa, beats the odds with her hard work and determination. Students learn more about the injustices and inequalities felt by Native Americans in the 17th and 18th centuries. Along with learning about history and Native Americans, students can also read about the theme of using our own special gifts and talents to serve a greater purpose in this story.

In the realistic fiction genre, *Jingle Dancer* by Cynthia Leitich Smith, was our favorite. Present day Native Americans are positively shown living in the modern world just like everyone else. The family and friends of the main character, Jenna, are shown living in nice houses and have good jobs. They care about one another and support Jenna in her goals. There is some Native American language mixed in to the story so students can get a taste of what Creek language and traditions are like. Students learn through this book that Native Americans are not a people from the past but are people living among of today. They can also learn about Muscogee Creek Indian culture like language, food, and traditions such as preparing for and going to a pow wow. There is another underlying theme in the story of honoring other and your commitments. We appreciated the glossary in the back of the book to help students learn Muscogee Creek Indian words. There is also an author's note that gives students more facts to clarify the story for them and make it even more real.

Saltpie: A Choctaw Journey from Darkness into Light by Tim Tingle was another good story about Native Americans from present day. This story shows a normal family who love one another and respect and support each other. Students can learn just how normal modern day Native Americans are to everyone else. There is a little bit of background in the story about how Native Americans were treated in the mid-1900s. So students can see that Native Americans have had a long history of mistreatment and injustice. Students can see what kind of damage people do by being ignorant of one another's cultures. I really liked the underlying themes of familial love and letting go of grudges or turning the other cheek and focusing on the good in others. Tim Tingle adds an author's note in the back of the book about the mistreatment of Native American people in the very recent past and mistreatment that continues on today. These facts can help open students eyes to the injustice that could be happening right in front of them.

The last book which is recommended for educators to add to their Native American culture collection is *Sky Sisters* by Jan Bourdeau Waboose. This book is set in present day and shows a normal Native American family and the relationship between two sisters as they uphold an Anishinawbe Ojibaway tradition of going out at night to watch the Northern Lights. There is some Ojibaway vocabulary included in the story for students to hear and learn about. Students can see how some Native Americans are living today, and they can realize that their own relationships with their siblings are quite similar. There was no author's note except an acknowledgement that the author is Native American. This story can also teach students about the special feelings of being out at night in the winter and watching the Northern Lights.

7. Conclusion

There are a number of children's books which do highlight the wonderful contributions of Native Americans, but educators should still be concerned about the factual information. With advice from researchers such as Dr. Cathy Gutierrez-Gomez, Dr. Debbie Reese, and Betsy Hearne, teachers are able to select thoughtful, purposeful, and accurately themed Native American children's literature. As the United States continues to become more diverse, teachers can expect to see an increased demand for culturally appropriate children's books to include in the educational setting.

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