



Jean-Claude Lefebvre

COLUMBUS AND NATIVE ISSUES in the Elementary Classroom

BY BOB PETERSON

Many of us grew up with the seemingly innocent refrain, “In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” Throughout our schooling, our understanding of Columbus didn’t move much beyond this simple rhyme.

Unfortunately, the education of children today is not much different. While children’s books, social studies texts, and the digital world may be more colorful, the approach is too often the same.

It is not easy for early childhood and elementary school teachers to challenge the Columbus myth in a way that doesn’t just demonize Columbus. We need to help students understand Columbus’ individual role in the context of European colonialism that sought wealth and land at the expense of the millions of Native Americans. Students should understand that many Native peoples resisted the European invasion and, despite a history of near genocide, have survived. Also, teachers should strive to have their students understand that Native

people live in all 50 states and in all countries of the Americas and continue to resist discrimination and oppression.

To do this requires first that teachers themselves are well educated or, in many cases, reeducated on these issues. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* and Hans Koning’s *Columbus, His Enterprise* are good places to start. Equally, if not more important is to learn from Native people in your area. Take the time to check out local Native organizations and events, ask them for advice on what might be most helpful for your own education and your students, and check with your local librarian for resources on the original and/or current Native inhabitants of your community.

Assess Your Students

How we approach issues such as Columbus and stereotypes depends on children’s developmental levels. For a child of 4 or 5 years old, “history” is

yesterday and the “future” is tomorrow. A 5th grader, on the other hand, might be more sophisticated—but often thinks Martin Luther King, Jr. fought against slavery and views historical figures uncritically. Even the youngest children, however, should begin to experiment with words such as “fair,” “unfair,” and “stereotype,” just as we try to teach them the meaning of “respect” and “cooperate.”

One way to start studying Columbus and Native Americans is to assess what students already know. Ask them who were the original inhabitants of the land where their school is located and what they know of them. Ask what they know about Christopher Columbus (or an early European settler who first came to your state or community).

Another approach is to have students as a homework assignment interview family members about what they know and think about Columbus and Columbus Day. At the multiracial school where I work, 1st-grade teachers use this assignment to learn what parents think and to demonstrate that there are multiple views about Columbus.

Responses from families and students vary. Occasionally, they are completely incorrect or based on stereotypes. When a student says, for example, “My dad said, ‘Columbus was great because he was one of the few people of his time who thought the world

was round’”—a false statement—I respond, “Well, that’s what I was taught in school too. We’re going to research that to see if that’s correct.”

Sometimes in early discussions of Native Americans a student might comment about people wearing feathers or living in a tipi. Such statements are based on stereotypes and should be challenged. I point out that such ideas are “stereotypes.” I write the word on the board and review its meaning, if we’ve already covered this concept during the school year, or ask students what they think it means if we have not. I explain that a stereotype is an untrue statement about a whole group of people. If I haven’t introduced the concept prior I say something like, “This is an important word and idea that we are going to learn about, and in fact we are going to hear from Native children what they think about stereotypes.”

An Anti-Stereotype Curriculum

When stereotypes are out in the open, it’s crucial they be dealt with. You might work with colleagues to build an “anti-stereotype curriculum.” Here are some activities and class discussion starters that might be useful:

- Show the filmstrip *Unlearning “Indian” Stereotypes*, by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (available in DVD format through Rethinking Schools), and discuss it with your students. For younger children, show it in three or four parts and discuss each separately.

- Ask students what the Native children in *Unlearning “Indian” Stereotypes* identified as stereotypes about Native Americans and how the Native children felt when they saw such stereotypes in the books.

- Show *Unlearning “Indian” Stereotypes* a second time and ask your students to remember as much as they can about how the Native children described the history of their people and the unfair things that happened to them.

- Ask students if anyone in their extended family or friends of their family has Native American heritage. I have this conversation as part of a larger unit when students write autobiographies. Often children proudly talk about their own or their relatives’ Native heritage.

- At a separate time, revisit the word “stereotype” and help students recall the definition—as a mistaken idea about how a whole group of people think, behave, or dress. Give examples that do not relate to American Indians, such as the view by some that girls can’t be good baseball players, or boys can’t cook, or that all elderly people are frail. Ask students: What is wrong with stereotypes? How could these be hurtful? Use one of the above examples: If a coach thought that all girls couldn’t play baseball, whom might that hurt and how? Students will likely point

Stereotype Checklist

The book *Through Indian Eyes*, edited by Slapin and Seale, has a checklist to evaluate children’s books. The checklist examines both blatant stereotypes and more subtle biases. Some of the many questions raised:

- In ABC books, is “E” for Eskimo or “I” for Indian? In picture books are children shown “playing Indian”?

- Are Native people shown as savages or primitive people rather than as human beings who are members of highly complex societies?

- Are Native people always shown the same, without regard for the cultural, religious, and language differences among tribes?

- Are Native people described with racist imagery, such as “half-naked,” “brutal,” or “bloodthirsty”? Do the Native people speak in short, inarticulate sentences such as “Me go. Soldier make fire. We now hide.”?

- Is Native culture depicted in a condescending way in which, for example, religious beliefs are “superstitions”? Is there a paternalistic distinction between “them” and “us”?



Andrew Connors

Students and a Native elder drum together.

out that stereotypes like this could easily lead to the coach discriminating against and not letting girls be on the team. It can also prevent girls from having the opportunity to play and practice, making the stereotype self-fulfilling.

- Describe some stereotypes about Native Americans, and try to make analogies with children's own experiences. Ask the children how their family dresses for special occasions and ceremonies, such as weddings. Point out that it's a stereotype to think that all people of their ethnic background always dress as if they were at a wedding. Likewise, it's a stereotype to think that all Indians dress with feathers all the time.

- As an extension activity for *Unlearning "Indian" Stereotypes*, have students become "stereotype detectives." Collect some stereotypical materials—greeting cards, old alphabet and counting books, history books, or children's books on Columbus. (The success of this activity depends on locating fairly obvious stereotypes. I have a box in my classroom closet where I store books with stereotypes that I've collected from library discards, rummage sales, and second-hand book stores.) Model how to identify a stereotype using one of your collected materials writing what it is and why it is a stereotype. In groups, have students examine materials that you have collected. Some of the most common stereotypes are found in alphabet books that have "I for Indian," or in children's favorites such as *Clifford's*

Halloween by Norman Bridwell, in which Clifford uses a feather headdress to dress up as an Indian; or Maurice Sendak's *Alligators All Around*, in which the alligators are "imitating Indians" by wearing feather headdresses, carrying tomahawks, and smoking pipes. Also look at stereotypes in society at large, such as in the names of sports teams or cars or mascots for schools. Talk about the Cleveland Indians, or the Jeep Cherokee, or Winnebago motor homes. Ask students what other cars or sports teams named after nationality groups. Have students reflect on how such stereotypes hurt Indians and distort other people's images of them and their cultures.

- Use the article (p. 131) on people fighting against Indian "mascots" to start a discussion on what people can do to fight stereotypes.

- Point out and discuss stereotypes in books students read in class. As we model such thinking and give children the opportunity to think on their own—"Did you notice any stereotypes in that story?"—children will improve their ability to think critically.

- Use quality books to show how contemporary Native people live and look. *Children of Native America Today*, by Yvonne Wakim Dennis and Arlene Hirschfelder (Charlesbridge, 2003) is a wonderful collection of photos and brief descriptions of Native children today.

- Invite Native American adults into your classroom to talk about their jobs and families and

how they feel about how Native Americans have been treated.

- Have children think about a time in their lives when they fought against something that wasn't fair. Explain how Native peoples have fought for what is "fair"—their land and way of life.

Taking Action

As children become aware of how unfair stereotypes are, teachers might encourage them to not only complain about them, but to take action. Educating others, writing to publishers and stores, and talking to librarians are all possibilities. One time after a discussion of Indian stereotypes, my 5th-grade students seemed particularly angered by what they had learned. The next day they talked about how their siblings in 1st grade had come home with construction-paper headdresses with feathers.

"That's a stereotype!" the students proudly proclaimed.



*In ABC books, is "E" for "Eskimo"?
From Reed & Oswald, My Little Golden
Dictionary.*

Helping Young Children Critique Columbus Books

As part of an "anti-stereotype curriculum," it is useful to have children break into groups and examine books on Columbus. The following questions can be written as a chart and can help children recognize the subtle ways in which books present stereotypes and distort information.

1. How many times did Columbus talk?
2. How many times did we get to know what he was thinking?
3. How many times did the Native people have names?
4. How many times did the Native people talk?
5. How many times did we get to know what the Native people were thinking?
6. What do you learn about Columbus's life?
7. What do you learn about Native people's lives?
8. Does the book describe the Native people's feelings?
9. Does the book describe how Columbus treated the Native people?

"What did you do about it?" I asked.

"Tripped it up." "I slugged him," came the chorus of responses. Cringing and making a mental note to strengthen my conflict resolution curriculum, I initiated a discussion. "What else might you have done with your brother? Why do your brothers and sisters have feather headdresses and how do we learn such things?"

Finally the students decided there were more productive things they could do. They first scoured the school library for books with stereotypes. Since

they didn't find many, they decided to investigate the 1st-grade room of one of their siblings. They wrote a letter to the teacher asking permission, and then went in armed with clipboards, paper, and pens. They found a picture of an Indian next to the letter "I" in the alphabet strip on the wall. They came back and decided they wanted to teach the 1st graders about stereotypes. I was skeptical, but agreed, and after much rehearsal, they entered the 1st-grade classroom to give their lesson. Later they reflected on it and two students wrote in our school newspaper:

We have been studying stereotypes of Native Americans. What is a stereotype? It's when somebody says something that's not true about another group of people. For example, it is a stereotype if you think all Indians wear feathers or say "HOW!" Or if you think that all girls are delicate. Why? Because some girls are strong.

Columbus Revisited

To find out what your students know about Columbus, have them draw or write what they have learned previously. Based on what they know, different approaches might be tried.

Even for very young children, teachers can talk about concepts such as fairness, discovery, and culture. Through dramatization and discussion, children can recognize that if someone was living in their house and some one else came up and "discovered" it, it wouldn't be fair for the new person to kick the current resident out. A similar dramatization about Columbus can dispel the myth of the "discovery of the new world."

The "discovered" purse exercise—where a teacher "discovers" and claims a student's purse or backpack—is a great way to start a discussion (see article, p. 17). I do it every year with my students as an introduction to our social studies unit on Columbus.

After such activities, a good next step is reading or talking about accurate accounts of Columbus. Do the children know, for example, that few of the Native children who witnessed Columbus' arrival in the Americas ever grew to adulthood? Or that Columbus and the Spaniards purposefully used attack dogs against Native peoples, not to mention more gruesome tactics such as cutting off hands and burning Native people alive? That Columbus initiated the trans-Atlantic slave trade when he sent hundreds of Native people back to Spain on his second voyage, to be sold as slaves?

By such dramatization and questions, I spark interest in Columbus, highlighting that this was not only a huge conflict between invading Europeans and Native peoples 500 years ago, but remains a conflict today in terms of how we sum up this history.

I use Jane Yolen's book, *Encounter*, as a way to help kids imagine what a Taíno view might have been towards the first Europeans. I contrast that to a traditional children's book on Columbus that glorifies his role.

I also have children read, discuss, illustrate their own books about Columbus, either using the story written by Tina Thomas (see p. 42) or selections from other books which I usually read aloud. I read selections from books such as *Taínos: The People Who Welcomed Columbus* by Francine Jacobs, and *Columbus and the World Around Him* by Milton Meltzer.

After the initial introduction to my unit, I play the song "1492" (see box p. 41) by Nancy Schimmel and use the song to explain some of the many Native American nations that existed at the time of Columbus. Later, I use Buffy Sainte-Marie's powerful song, "My Country, 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying" (see p. 28), to contrast the treatment of Native peoples to our nation's leaders' professed adherence to democratic ideals. I also stress the positive through using the alphabet of things that Native Americans gave to the world (see p. 75). I have kids choose an item from the list and use mime to get the other students to guess it. As a homework assignment, they need to list 15 different things at home that have origins in the Americas.

Textbook Detectives

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"Why do some books not tell the truth?" "Why was I told something else at home or last year in school?" "My mom says Columbus was a brave man and a hero."

These are good questions without easy answers. I have found that only by integrating such questions throughout my entire curriculum do children begin to realize that the content of TV and textbooks is often shaped to serve interests of the status quo and those who most benefit by the way society is organized. By starting with a critical examination of Columbus, I set the stage for similar examinations later in the year—for example, when we look at how a handful of rich, white, male property owners elected our first president or when we examine a news article on the economy that quotes only business or government leaders and ignores ordinary workers or union leaders.

I show students Bill Bigelow's slide-show on children's books on Columbus (see Resources, p. 187) and we discuss the omissions and lies of many children's books still in publication. I then tell my kids I want them to be textbook detectives and to critically examine various children's books on Columbus. In cooperative groups, kids brainstorm what they should look for to see if the books on Columbus are accurate. Each group shares their ideas, and overnight I consolidate their ideas into a "Textbook Detective" sheet (see box, p. 38). The next day, working in pairs, the students

evaluate different books. They share their findings with the whole class, and we brainstorm what can be done. Ideas range from writing authors (or suing them!) to talking to librarians.

One girl wrote to Ann McGovern, author of *Christopher Columbus* (Scholastic, 1992): "The kids of La Escuela Fratney are reading your book as an experiment. We think that it does not tell the whole truth. I don't want to be mean or pushy, but it doesn't say that Columbus forced six Taínos to go with him on his first trip back. He wanted gold and sometimes he killed Taínos to get it. The book doesn't say anything about him killing Taínos, or even that there were Taínos. It says 'Indian.'"

Another student reflected on another book, "I think if a teacher made me read this book I really would think Columbus was great, but he wasn't so great. All the little kids who read this book are going

to get messed up. The kids of today need to dig deep so they get the truth.”

Rarely do authors or publishers respond. A couple times, my students elected to write additions or notes of caution for those books and asked the librarian to put them with the biased books.

Role-Play Trial

As a culminating activity, the class holds a trial of Columbus (see pp. 87-93) which I have adapted for my 5th graders (see p. 94). The students examine evidence, learn about trial procedures, practice making arguments and counterarguments, write speeches, and ultimately hold a lively trial in which Columbus, his men, the King and Queen of Spain, and the Taínos are all charged with contributing to the violence against the Taínos.

Other Activities

A host of other activities on this subject are possible. Children might develop questions and interview people in their families and community. They could also ask “What do you think about Christopher Columbus?” and “When, where, and how did you learn about him?” The responses could then be charted and discussed in class or small groups.

Host a debate in your classroom over the question of whether Columbus Day, the federal holiday, should be abolished, changed to commemorate Native Americans or revised in some other way.

As children gain a new understanding of Columbus and the damaging effects of stereotypes, they often want to do something about it. I encourage them to make their own stories, poems, dramas, murals, videos, or drawings about Columbus and Native peoples. Using Paul Fleischman’s “Honeybees” dialogue poem (p. 55 in *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1*, Rethinking Schools, 2007) as a model, I often have children work in pairs and write a dialogue poem between Columbus and a Taíno.

One year my students created a drama for a school program on Columbus Day that had a space invader “discover” the entire planet earth and claim it for his own. First I gave the children a cartoon drawing of Columbus’ landfall with Taíno people looking on. I asked them to write what both groups might have been thinking. I asked them to write a skit either about the interaction between Columbus



Osceola, Seminole leader, led a successful resistance of Native Americans and escaped African slaves against U.S. troops.

and the Taínos, or about why some Native people don’t like to celebrate Columbus Day.

As a class we combined the ideas from the small groups and came up with a play that had some children explaining to their classmates why they weren’t going to celebrate the holiday. They used the space invader analogy as a way to explain the issue to the audience. It ended with the aliens taking slaves back to their own galaxy and “settling” our planet.

Important Reminders

In discussing such issues, two points are especially important. First, both the Native Americans and Africans fought

valiantly, sometimes successfully, for their own freedom. One of the most moving examples in U.S. history involves the Seminole Wars in Florida in the early to mid-1800s, in which Seminole Indians united with runaway and free African Americans to fight the U.S. army. Each year in my reading group we read the children’s story called *Night Bird* by Kathleen V. Kudlinski (Scholastic, 1993), and I tell them the story of Osceola, the Seminole leader during the second Seminole War, whose African wife was kidnapped by slave traders. Henrietta Buckmaster’s book, *The Seminole Wars*, is another good source of information. Written at a 5th-grade reading level, selections of the book can be read to a whole class or by children in groups. The story of cooperation between Native American and Africans who freed themselves lends itself to provocative role plays and discussions about the need for multiracial unity, then and today.

Second, not all Europeans supported the barbarous acts against people of color. Even in Columbus’s era, there were forceful critics of the mistreatment of Native peoples, such as Bartolomé de las Casas and Antonio de Montesinos (see p. 103). And while the Founding Fathers of the United States were writing a constitution that made slavery legal, Thomas Paine eloquently wrote against such a view.

It is also important to link the myths surrounding Columbus to other myths of U.S. history. In particular, it is essential to expose the truth about the colonization of the Americas—its effect on the Native populations and how it led to the enslavement of millions of people from Africa. By critically evaluating U.S. history as presented in most social studies books, we can help children learn to think critically and independently.

Not Just History

Children must understand that when we discuss Native Americans, it is not only history. Native peoples have survived despite the European conquest, and live and work in all strata of society. They continue their cultural traditions, and still seek the justice they have been long denied.

By using various books, maps, and pictures, teachers can help children understand that there are hundreds of different nations of Native peoples living today in the Americas who speak different languages and have different cultures. One way of doing this is to refer to a particular people or nation by name (e.g., Cherokee, Hopi, or Yakama.)

It is essential to introduce political concepts such as the importance of treaty rights. Children should learn that tribes are independent governments with a special relationship to the federal government. They should learn of the hundreds of treaties that the U.S. government signed with Native peoples and then broke. They should be familiar with Native struggles to save their land and protect their resources. They should learn of indigenous views toward the environment and respect for Mother Earth.

For example, in 1855, Northwest Indians were acknowledged to have rights to fish “as long as the sun would shine,” and yet in recent years they have had to struggle to protect their fishing rights. As part of the 4th-grade social studies curriculum, students could examine how Native peoples were pushed out of their state, investigating what treaties were signed and if they’ve been broken.

To deal with contemporary issues, children may want to write some of the organizations listed in Resources (beginning on p. 182) or invite local Native Americans to speak at school.

While information on political struggles is hard to come by, there is a growing body of Native American folk tales and poetry for young children. One of the best collections, which also suggests dozens of related activities for the elementary school curriculum, is *Keepers of the Earth, Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children*, by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac.

As teachers build an anti-stereotype curriculum, it is important to include parents. The curriculum can be an important way to help educate parents, and to encourage parental involvement in the classroom. Parents, in turn, often have important perspectives to offer and can suggest how to carry an anti-stereotype approach into the home.

Teachers should prepare parents for alternative views of Columbus Day and Thanksgiving. Teachers should also use Halloween as a way to educate around stereotypes, explaining to parents why dress-

ing up like an “Indian” perpetuates stereotypes and is insulting to Native people.

The best way to approach the Columbus issue is to use it as a catalyst for change. Perhaps it will help us reexamine approaches to teaching not only about Native Americans and Columbus, but about other oppressed and “silenced” people as well.

And as children awaken to the true and rich history of the Americas, we can help them become more inquisitive and responsible for their future in the Americas.

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1492

A Song

by Nancy Schimmel (Sisters’ Choice)

In fourteen hundred and ninety two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.
It was a courageous thing to do,
But someone was already here.

Chorus:

The Inuit and Cherokee,
the Aztec and Menominee,
Onondaga and the Cree (clap, clap)
Columbus sailed across the sea,
But someone was already here.

Columbus knew the world was round,
So he looked for the East
while westward bound,
But he didn’t find
what he thought he found,
And someone was already here.

Chorus

It isn’t like it was empty space,
Caribs met him face to face.
Could anyone discover the place,
When someone was already here?

Chorus

So tell me who discovered what?
He thought he was in a different spot.
Columbus was lost,
the Caribs were not.
They were already here.

Chorus

Recorded by Sally Rogers on the CD, Rainbow Sign (Rounder, 1992).