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An Anti-bias Approach to Thanksgiving

By Teacher Lisa

One of our core principals at King Street is a commitment to anti-bias curriculum. At the center of this approach is a dedication to “help children avoid patterns of thought that include many stereotypes and prejudices endemic to our society” (King Street Handbook 2011, p.10).

Although the celebration of Thanksgiving is held dear by many as a time of sharing, preparing special foods, and enjoying family togetherness, its history and accoutrements screen many historical inaccuracies, oversimplifications, and stereotypes against Native Americans. As one of the first steps in the journey toward an anti-bias approach is to recognize bias, I would like us all to take a careful look at how we talk about and celebrate Thanksgiving with young children.

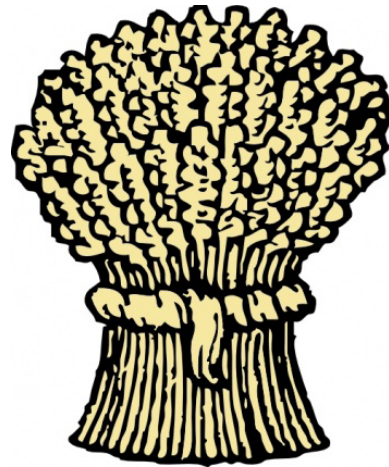
The complexity of removing harmful bias from national holiday celebrations becomes clear in the history and customs surrounding the Thanksgiving holiday. As Michael Dorris, of the Native Studies Department of Dartmouth College, puts forth:

Native Americans have more than one thing not to be thankful for on Thanksgiving. Pilgrim Day, and its antecedent feast, Halloween, represent annual twin peaks of Indian stereotyping. From early October through the end of November, “cute little Indians” abound on greeting cards, advertising posters, in costumes and school projects....Virtually none of the standard fare surrounding either Halloween or Thanksgiving contains an ounce of authenticity, historical accuracy or cross-cultural perception (as quoted in Derman-Sparks 1989, p.87).

Dorris goes on to give an example of these inaccuracies in the following discussion of a ditto that his young son brought home from school. The handout contained a picture of the “first Thanksgiving” with a caption reading, “They served pumpkins and turkeys and squash; the Indians had never seen such a feast!”

On the contrary! The pilgrims had never seen “such a feast,” since all foods mentioned are exclusively indigenous to the Americas and had been provided, or so legend has it, by the local tribe. If there was a Plymouth Thanksgiving dinner....then the event was rare indeed. Pilgrims generally considered Indians to be devils in disguise, and treated them as such. And if the hypothetical Indians who participated in that hypothetical feast thought that all was well and were thankful in the expectation of a peaceful future, they were sadly mistaken (as quoted in Derman-Sparks 1989, p.87-88).

So how then do we proceed? I agree with Guy W. Jones and Sally Moomaw, authors of *Lessons from Turtle Island: Native Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms* (2002), when they assert that “While explaining the real history of Thanksgiving might be too graphic and frightening for young children, inaccurate legends can be replaced with new traditions” (Jones and Moomaw 2002, p.11). I am not suggesting that we ignore the holiday and shun its mention in the classroom. Rather that we will spend time helping children understand that Thanksgiving means different things to different families; that it is celebrated in different ways in different families; and that some families may not celebrate the holiday at all.



In place of perpetuating the same half-truths and ethnocentrism we may have been taught in elementary school about the pious, peaceful pilgrims inviting the uncivilized local Indians over for a feast to celebrate a bountiful harvest, we can look to the spirit of the holiday to guide our approach with children.

We can focus on the concept of feeling thankful for all that we have and the idea of friends and family coming together to share a special meal.

We can also carefully evaluate children’s books, activities, and other resources used in the classroom and at home for bias (as is always our goal), in this case specifically bias toward Native Americans. Although school projects and children’s publications have come a long way since Michael Dorris’s experience with his son’s homework in the 1980’s, we still need to be careful.

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Some stereotypes to watch for include:

- **Skin color:** often referred to as “red,” although like all racial groups, Native American skin pigmentation is varying shades of brown.
- **Language:** use of terms such as “how” and “ugh,” war whoops, and broken-English language structures. For example, in *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks 1980, p.20), the Indian uses such phrases as, “You still big. You stop eat. Get right size.” These language stereotypes are offensive because they suggest that native peoples are not civilized, all speak the same language, and don’t have highly developed languages.
- **Homes:** Children often believe that all Native Americans live in Tipis. Although some Native Peoples lived in Tipis, there was a huge diversity in dwelling structures by region. Further, this was in the past so any exploration of historical homes should be juxtaposed with homes of Native peoples today. “Books such as *A House Is a House for Me* (Hoberman 1978), still being sold in bookstores as of this writing, may make attempts at diversity but continue to lock Native peoples in houses of the past:
An igloo’s a house for an Eskimo.
A tepee’s a house for a Cree.
A pueblo’s a house for a Hopi.
And a wigwam may hold a Mohee.”
(Jones and Moomaw 2002, p.13)
- **Warlike:** fighting and violence had a place in Native American cultures of the past, just as they did in English, French, Chinese, Russian (the list goes on) cultures, as well as in current events. However, media that focuses solely on violence leaves children with the impression that it is the defining characteristic of Native peoples.
- **Living in the Past:** Overtly or more subtly implying that Native Americans lived only in the past. If reading books and/or using materials that represent Native American people in the past, be sure to include an equal number of sources which depict Native Americans in everyday, modern life.
- **Culture:** Misrepresentation of cultural traditions; characters behaving in a manner inconsistent with their tribal culture. Many sources lump all native cultures together as a generic “Indian culture” when there was and is a tremendous amount of diversity among tribes. Or, European elements like “Indian Princesses” may be added to them.

As the authors of *Lessons from Turtle Island* point out, Authenticity is important. Europeans and European Americans realize that Europe is composed of many different nationalities and cultures. Therefore, readers would not accept a book about an Italian man described as wearing a Scottish kilt (unless the character was experiencing a huge identity crisis!). [We] must demand a comparable degree of authenticity in books about Native peoples; otherwise, we perpetuate the myth that all Indians are essentially the same rather than members of more than 500 distinct Nations (Jones and Moomaw 2002, p.10) and easily two thousand languages (Zinn 1999, p.18).

My purpose is not to impart guilt, but to inform and empower us as educators of our children to become more aware of bias, to challenge it ourselves, and teach our children to do the same. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, author James W. Loewen posits “The antidote to feel-good history is not feel-bad history but honest and inclusive history...Correctly taught, the issues of the era of the first Thanksgiving could help Americans grow more thoughtful and more tolerant...” (Loewen 1995, p.97).

