

“Dressing up” for Halloween

by Wendy Z. Warren

My family has a secret. For many years, I didn't even know it should be a secret, but it's quite important to me now. It was an innocent mistake that came out of the suburban culture of my youth. Really, I wish we had all known better. I share this story with you now, with the hope that we are all “learning to know better.”

Early each October, Mom asked my brother and me what we wanted to “be” for Halloween. Yep, that’s the language she used. “What do you want to ‘be’?” She always made our costumes, so the question came with the hope that we would choose something simple. I remember nurse, batman, ghost, clown and bunny outfits, which we showed off when we ended our annual trick-or-treating at our grandparents’ house. She was thrilled the year my younger brother, Jim, said he wanted to “be” an Indian.

“I think that’s a great idea!” she said, a picture instantly popping into her head. You know the one. We all—Indian and non-Indian--have it emblazoned in our memories.

“You can just wear your tan pants, a brown shirt and your slippers,” she said, sighing with relief that at least one costume would be simple that year. My brother had plenty of “shades of brown” clothes. “Then we’ll make a headband, stick a feather in it, and put some war paint on your face. You’ll look so cute.”

Remembering the scene now makes me squirm. I consider keeping the family secret. But it’s a scene that was, and unfortunately still is, played out in many households around the country. What’s my problem with it? Okay, you can “be” a cowboy, a doctor, a firefighter, a soldier—those are things a kid could grow up to “be.” Or they can dress as cartoon characters, superheroes, animals, or, in their preadolescent years, creatures from horror movies. But my mother never would have let us paint our faces black to “trick or treat” as African-Americans. And we wouldn’t have asked to “dress up” as Jewish or Hispanic or Asian. So why didn’t it cross our minds that wearing an “Indian costume” amounted to the same thing? And where did we get such clear images of what an “Indian costume” should look like?



The answer has to be the movies...and television...and advertising...and sports team mascots and illustrated books. From a lot of places, really. And from these stereotyped images, we thought we knew what “an Indian” was. As if there is even such a thing as “an Indian.” I grew up in Ohio, where my family occasionally went to Indian festivals in the summer. I knew there were tribes, but I didn’t really think about the ways they might be different from each other. I may have had

Indian kids in my classes occasionally, but I never really thought about what they looked like—or even noticed they were there. And now when I think about it, you know why? Because they looked like kids!

My mom should have dressed Jim up as a kid. That would have been the perfect solution. That is the lesson I wish we had known to teach.

Now, I teach at Columbia Falls Jr. High, and some of my students may be Black-foot, or Cree, Chippewa, or Assiniboine, Crow or Kootenai, or any combination thereof. And how would a non-Indian kid dress up to look like them? Well, they might wear baggy jeans held up with a belt, a t-shirt, a ballcap—which I constantly have to ask them to remove.... Sound familiar?

My Native students will tell you that “Indians” are not people who existed only in the past. They are not the stereotypes you still see in some children’s books or in the movies or in advertising. They are not mascots. My students have the same kinds of hopes and dreams that every kid has. When you read the words of Indian kids in the pages of *Full Circle*, I don’t think you will see your stereotype. Because as you come to know these kids, the stereotypes disappear. They’re kids—with all the rich complexities and diverse family backgrounds that kids have. And you just can’t dress ‘em up.



So---what do you call the clothing people wear when they dance at Powwows?

The word “costume” makes me think of dressing up for Halloween, or for a play—something that’s not real. So I never use that term. To borrow an analogy from Debbie Reese (<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>), when a Catholic priest is in his robes, you wouldn’t call that a “costume”.

I’ve heard people refer to their own dance outfits as “outfits,” “regalia,” or “traditional clothes.” Each piece of a dance outfit has significance, and is put on in a ceremonial way, so if I know the term for the part of the clothing I want to refer to, I use that. Otherwise, I listen carefully, ask questions, and use terms I hear the dancers use.



As I thought about the things I have learned that have convinced me that I would never again consider dressing a child in an “Indian costume” for Halloween, I realized that there were probably many other things I have done in my teaching career that were equally embarrassing. Some of the first that come to mind are some of the “Indian art” activities I found in activity books that I used in an honest attempt to teach about Indian cultures. Now I know enough to understand that some of them were quite disrespectful, in that they trivialized things that were quite important—even sacred—in some Indian cultures. But how can a non-Indian teacher come to know what things are sacred and what are not?

When ordering Indian Education for All materials for one of our school libraries, a librarian friend found a wonderful book that provided some helpful information—the first of its kind I’ve seen. It’s a book called *Lessons from Turtle Island: Native Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms*, by Guy W. Jones and Sally Moomaw. Guy is Hunkpapa Lakota, a full-blood member of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation. He lives in Dayton, Ohio and is one of the founders of the Miami Valley Council for Native Americans. Now, there are no reservations in Ohio, and it is not a state that comes to mind when you think of American Indians. But Bobby and I just grinned when we found out where he was and what his work entails, because it brings us full circle once again. Bobby began her teaching career in Dayton, and the school she directed—where I learned to teach—is in Oxford, Ohio, just a few hours down the road.

And that road leads us to the other author of this book, Sally Moomaw. Sally is the associate director for professional development of the Arlitt Child and Family Research and Education Center at the University of Cincinnati, even closer to Oxford, and she is the co-author of this book. The stories she tells in the book sound much like Bobby’s and mine. When Sally began to realize what she didn’t know about Native American people—even though she considered herself a well-educated person—she was appalled. She was a teacher, and she realized the implications her lack of knowledge had for her classroom. And so, like all of us, she began to learn. And that learning eventually led her to Guy and their collaboration on this wonderful book.

We bring you their introduction to a section of their book called “Cultural Insensitivity.” Here are their suggestions for more activities to avoid in the classroom and the reasons these activities are culturally sensitive. Because how can we know until somebody shares this information with us? I’m so glad Guy and Sally have chosen to do just that.



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Cultural Insensitivity

Omission of Native peoples from the curriculum, inaccurate curriculum, and stereotyping all amount to cultural insensitivity. This is heightened, however, when well-meaning teachers introduce projects that are culturally inappropriate. Teachers may decide to have children “make” an object from a Native culture or ceremony because they equate such activities with hands-on learning. In fact, these activities often demean Native cultures, lead to misunderstanding, and perpetuate stereotypes. It is helpful to analyze various activities in order to understand why they are so problematic. The following are some typical projects often introduced into early childhood programs, along with an explanation of what the objects signify to Native cultures and why including them as projects is inappropriate. Several activity books, all purchased at national early childhood conferences, are discussed; however, teachers will recognize that the types of activities described in these books are typical of those in numerous books sold throughout the country. Teachers should especially note that many of these activities involve sacred objects. When teachers simplify these ceremonial objects, they take away from their sacredness.

Feathers and Headdresses

This is one of the most common “Indian” activities used by teachers of young children. Some activity books, such as *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 51-56), give specific directions for war bonnets or headdresses. They illustrate the somewhat prevalent attitude that children can play Indian, just as they might play cowboy. The important difference is that cowboy is an occupation, while Indian is a race. Native peoples do not consider making headdresses or using feathers in “Indian” projects to be acceptable. To Native peoples, feathers are sacred. They are often used in ceremonial practice. As a comparison, teachers would not have children make and wear yarmulkes, the traditional rounded caps used by Jewish men to cover their heads in the presence of G-d, as a strategy for understanding Jewish people.



Fancy Dance Bustle

Traditional Native American dance regalia should not be equated with a dance costume. The regalia of Native dancers represent a part of their personal identity and also their affiliation with a particular Indian Nation. Dance regalia are considered sacred. Nevertheless, *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 48) suggests that children make dance bustles out of pizza boxes and paper plates. Indian children don't play with dance regalia, because they are taught to respect it. Non-Native children also should be taught cultural respect. They should not be encouraged to make or play with Native American dance regalia.

Indian Tom-toms

Teachers err when they assume Native American drums are just musical instruments, as are most drums in European cultures. Thus, they often assemble materials for children to create "Indian" drums. *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 83-84) suggests that Indian drums be made from oatmeal boxes. To American Indian people, the drum is sacred and represents the heartbeat. It is treated with great respect. For example, singers at powwows never leave the drum unattended. Indian children do not make drums; neither should non-Native children create drums designated as Indian.

Face Painting

Face painting is another way in which non-Native children associate Native American peoples with war and violence. *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 71) gives directions for war paint and other types of Indian face paint. Recently, Guy was asked to bring Native American dancers, singers,



and storytellers into the Dayton schools for a special program. At the first school they visited, the dancers wore regalia but did not have time to paint their faces. The children enjoyed the program and responded positively. After lunch, however, the dancers had enough time to apply paint before the afternoon performances. As the dancers entered the stage, the children became frightened and began to scream hysterically. They screamed so loudly, in fact, that they drowned out the Drum. When the children had finally calmed down, Guy explained the significance of the colors of the paint and described how the manner in which the face is painted tells a story. The dancers then related how each design used in their face paint was given to them in ceremony. When evaluating activities, teachers must recognize that television, movies, and books have all created powerful images for children of war-painted savages. Introducing face painting as an "Indian" activity reinforces these images and detracts from the significance and symbolism of the paint to the individual and the culture.



Rattles

As with drums, activity books such as *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 78-82) treat Native American rattles as rhythm instruments to be copied as classroom projects. Among Indian people, however, rattles are sacred and are used in ceremony. Thus, while it is fine to use rattles or maracas in the classroom, teachers should not cross the cultural boundary of making specifically "Indian rattles." Rattles have a special significance in Native cultures that should be respected.

Brown Bag Vests

Teachers sometimes have children make "Indian" vests from paper bags. *The Kids' Multicultural Art Book* (Terzian 1993, 16) and *More Than Moccasins* (Carlson 1994, 41) give instructions. Brown bag vests are not sacred, but they do reinforce the "all Indians are the same" stereotype that is common among children and society as a whole. While some Indian peoples wore leather vests, others did not. Another problem with this type of activity is that it conveys the notion that children can become Indian by dressing up. As with other cultures, the apparel of American Indian people is part of their identity, both as individuals and as part of their Native Nation.