

# Teaching Young Children about Native Americans and their Living Traditions

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In the summer of 2001, my husband and I were in Spokane, Washington during a Native American Powwow. Participants had traveled some distances, and they had arrived early to pitch tents, cook and prepare costumes for the traditional dances. There was music, dancing, native foods, and native crafts. As we looked around at the participants, we realized that these were extended families. This was not an occasion for tourists to gawk. It was an opportunity to renew acquaintances and to take pleasure in how the children had grown. It was an opportunity to reaffirm their cultures. The powwow did not reinforce the typical stereotypes whites hold of Native Americans. These people were not primitive, nor were they welfare recipients, alcoholics or operating Casinos. It is important for children to learn that Native Americans were and are people with viable cultures and with strong commitments to extended families. The books described below also reinforce the idea that Native peoples are human beings, struggling to maintain their cultural practices in spite of efforts of the past several centuries to wipe them out.

The first group of books discussed in this article look at the struggles of Native American peoples to live in and adapt to the modern world. They struggle to live in a world where other children make fun of them because they are “different.” They struggle to find and define home and live in two worlds at the same time. The second group of books emphasize the importance of traditional culture for Native Americans in shaping who they are.

## **Adapting to another World**

*Home to Medicine Mountain* by Chiori Santiago, illustrated by Judith Lowry (Children’s Book Press, 2002). For many years around the 1930’s Native American children were taken from their families and sent to government-run boarding schools, supposedly to make them ‘civilized.’ They were removed from their cultures and families and not able to practice their native languages or religious beliefs. In this book, two Maidu Indian boys are trying to get home to Medicine Mountain for the summer. It is a story about the importance of family and how these boys refused to be defeated in their quest to find their way home. Along the way, they encounter some excitement and adventure. I like the way this book created a captivating and adventurous story, while educating us about the sad fact that Native American children were taken from their families and sent to strange boarding schools. Intertwined in the sadness of reality is a very possible story about some children who stood up for themselves and tried to return home. A similar theme is examined by Eve Bunting in *Cheyenne Again* (Clarion Books, 1995), illustrated by Irving Toddy. In this story a boy is severely punished when he tries to escape.

*Eagle Song* by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by Dan Andreasen (Scholastic, 1999). This book tells the story of Danny, a young Mohawk boy who is ostracized by his Anglo peers, until his father comes to school and talks about the Iroquois culture with the children. This story depicts Danny’s experiences as a Mohawk boy moving to Brooklyn and struggling to fit in. It touches upon the readers’ experiences in shyness, fitting in and resolving conflicts. In the end, Danny is able to use his culture to make peace with the school bullies. He approaches one of them and says “My name is not Hiawatha and it isn’t Chief. My name is Daniel. . . maybe we could be friends. She’:kon. . . that means peace.” The book also introduces children to Native American folklore and religious beliefs, and helps children understand and sympathize with Danny’s situation.

*Pueblo Boy: Growing Up in Two Worlds* by Marcia Keegan (Viking Penguin, 1991). This book does a wonderful job of portraying the cultural life of a Native American child growing up in modern times. The main character, Timmy, lives in a house, works on a farm, rides his bike and plays on a Little League Baseball team. He is also very involved in his Pueblo culture. The book illustrates that Timmy is part of the Corn Clan and participates in Native American religious dances. We can use this book in the classroom not only to introduce aspects of the pueblo life, but also to encourage children to share and be proud of their culture and learn about others.

*Sky Dancers* by Connie Ann Kirk, illustrated by Christy Hale (Lee and Low, 2004). Native Americans have made important contributions to our way of life in twentieth century North America. In addition to an appreciation of beauty and of the need for ecological balance in nature, many of the Mohawk people became “Sky Walkers” in the earlier part of the twentieth century. These are the people who built the sky-scrappers, seemingly dancing from beam to steel beam as they worked. John Cloud’s father is one of these sky dancers, and John feels like he will burst for joy as he watches his father up so high he can hardly be seen.

NON-FICTION. To help children visualize the lives of Native Americans, we have included a work of non-fiction about a mother teaching her daughter to weave on a traditional loom, *Songs from the Loom: A Navajo Girl Learns to Weave* by Monty Roessel (Lerner, 1995). In this book, the author shares how his mother taught his daughter how to weave wool on a loom. It goes through the actual steps of weaving wool, while taking the reader through stories and traditions told by the grandmother to her granddaughter. This book also includes photographs, which are aesthetically attractive and help to solidify the non fiction aspect of the story to young readers.

**Struggling to Maintain Traditional Practices.** The second group of books is about the struggle to maintain traditional practices in the modern world. We start with *Keepers of the Earth – Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children* by Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by Carol Wood (Fulcrum, 1997). This book presents traditional tales from many different Native American tribes and cultures. Each story is accompanied by activities involving nature and the environment. It can be an important resource for any classroom. It can help students realize the value and respect Native Americans continue to place on nature. Many of the stories in this book and others emphasize the creation of the world and its people. Others are explanations of how things came to be as they are. The following stories represent some of these beliefs.

*Dancing Drum: A Cherokee Legend* by Terri Cohlene, illustrated by Charles Reasoner (Troll, 1991) is an excellent book to use in the classroom to teach about legends and folktales. In this story, Dancing Drum, a little Indian boy, tries to save his people from the wrath of the sun. Beyond expressing the Native American culture, this book also shows how cooperation between people can help solve problems.

*The Legend of the Bluebonnet* by Tomie de Paola, reteller and illustrator (Penguin, 1996). This folktale explains how the “Blue Bonnet” flower came to be. It is a good example of Native American culture in which nature and events are explained through folklore.

*Quillworker: A Cheyenne Legend* by Terri Cohlene, illustrated by Charles Reasoner (Sagebrush, 1996). Like many Native American folktales, this one explains how the Big Dipper was created. It reflects Native American culture in that many stories passed down through time and generations are used to explain the origin of things in nature.

*The People Shall Continue* by Simon Ortiz, illustrated by Sharol Graves (Children's Book Press, 1988). This book uses poetry and vivid illustrations to convey the history of Native Peoples from the time before people were born and up to the present day. The book emphasizes the importance of learning Native American beliefs and values. "The Earth is the source of all life. . . Her children continue the life of the Earth." "In order for our life to continue, we must struggle very hard for it." As the Europeans came and destroyed their homes, took away their children, and took their land, it became very hard to fight back. But the people told their children, "This is the life that includes you. This is the land that is yours." The poem concludes with an affirmation that all the poor people of the world must come together to build a new world, so that "the People shall continue."

*In My Mother's House* by Ann Nolan Clark, illustrated by Velino Herrera (Penguin, 1991). This is another book which expresses pueblo life through poetry and artwork. Each poem and photo captures an aspect of life for the Tewa tribe. It is another source to help children capture aspects of this Native American culture, as interpreted through poetry and illustration.