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October 2001

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Cornel Pewewardy Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Department of Teaching and Leadership, School of Education, University of Kansas

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Pewewardy, Cornel Ph.D., "Dispelling the Mascot Myth: The Misuse of Indigenous Peoples as Mascots in American Schools" (2001).
Sixth Annual National Conference, POCPWI . 6.
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Dispelling the Mascot Myth: The Misuse of Indigenous Peoples as Mascots in American Schools

Abstract

This workshop details the deculturalization process that takes place when Indigenous Peoples are used as mascots in school-related activities; examines the arguments(s) and defensive tactics used by sports fans and school officials to maintain these hegemonic images; and offers successful strategies for developing policy toward the elimination of Indigenous Peoples as mascots.

Cornel Pewewardy, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Department of Teaching and Leadership, School of Education,
University of Kansas

This workshop speaks to the American educator by discussing how, as educators, we are responsible for maintaining the ethics of teaching and for helping to eliminate racism in all aspects of school life. The current way indigenous mascots are used in school-related activities is oppressive and inaccurate. In this view, eradicating indigenous mascots has become an issue of educational equity. This workshop addresses the insidious ways indigenous mascots have been used to legitimate the conquest of indigenous peoples and reinforce harmful stereotypes, examines the relationship between popular sports culture and the arguments that many sport fans use in defense of their fight to maintain these hegemonic images and offers strategies organizations can use in developing policy toward the elimination of indigenous mascots from school-related activities.

Many schools around the country exhibit Indian mascots and logos, using nicknames and doing the "tomahawk chop" in sport stadiums with inauthentic representations of American Indian cultures. Many school officials claim they are honoring American Indians and insist that their school's sponsored activities are not offensive. I would argue otherwise and contend that these racist activities are a form of cultural violence. There is nothing in American Indian cultures that consciously aspires to be a mascot, logo or nickname for athletic teams. Teachers should research the matter and discover that American Indians would never have associated the sacred practices of becoming a warrior with the hoopla of a high school pep rally, brave and princess pageantry, half-time entertainment or being a sidekick to cheerleaders. Ironically, making fun of Indians in American sports culture has become as "American as apple pie and baseball."

The portrayal of Indian mascots in sports takes many forms. Some teams use generic Indian names, such as Indians, Braves or Chiefs, while others adopt specific tribal names like Seminoles, Comanches or Apaches. Indian mascots exhibit either idealized or comical facial features and "native" dress, ranging from body-length feathered (usually turkey) headdresses to more subtle fake buckskin attire or skimpy loincloths. Some teams and supporters display counterfeit Indian paraphernalia, including foam tomahawks, feathers, face paints and symbolic drums and pipes. They also use mock-Indian behaviors, such as the tomahawk chop, dances, chants, drumbeating, war-whooping and symbolic scalping.

Children begin to develop racial awareness at an extremely early and tender age, perhaps

as early as three or four years. It has been well established by clinical psychologists that the effect on children of negative stereotypes and derogatory images is to engender and perpetuate undemocratic and unhealthy attitudes that will plague our society for years to come. It should come as no surprise that both Indian and non-Indian children programmed on these stereotypes at early ages grow into adults who may unwittingly or unknowingly discriminate against Indians. These children have been prevented from developing authentic, healthy attitudes about Indians. It should also be no surprise that Indian children who constantly see themselves being stereotyped and their cultures belittled grow into adults feeling and acting like they were not as good as other people. This is a sure cause for low self-esteem in Indian children. Because racial stereotypes play an important role in shaping a young person's consciousness, these inauthentic behaviors makes a mockery of Indian culture and cause many American Indian youngsters to feel shame about their cultural identity. Subjective feelings, such as inferiority, are an integral part of consciousness and work together with the objective reality of poverty and deprivation to shape a young person's worldview. School environments should be places where students come to *unlearn* negative stereotypes that such mascots represent.

The exploitation of Indian mascots in school sponsored events becomes an issue of educational equity. Therefore, my professional challenge is to classroom teachers and administrators. As long as such mascots remain within the arena of school activities, both Indian and non-Indian children are learning to tolerate racism in schools. That's what children see at school and on television. As a result, schools only reinforce the negative images projected by popular culture. This is precisely what sport teams with negative Indian mascots teach them - that it is acceptable racism to demean a race or group of people through American sports culture. Therefore, for teachers this serves as a powerful *teaching moment* that could help to counter the fabricated images and manufactured pictures of Indian people that most school-age children have burned into their psyche by 50 years of mass media. Finally, I challenge administrators to provide the intellectual school leadership that will teach a critical perspective of multicultural education and help eliminate the cultural violence associated with Indian mascots used in schools. I hope this explanation in countering the Indian mascot issue is one tool both teachers and administrators can use in helping children think critically about multicultural issues in another school year.

Presenter

Dr. Cornel Pewewardy is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching and Leadership, School of Education, at the University of Kansas where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in Multicultural Education and Education of First Nations Peoples. He is also an adjunct instructor at Haskell Indian Nations University. Dr. Pewewardy earned a Doctorate of Education (1989) in Educational Administration from The Pennsylvania State University.

In 1990 Dr. Pewewardy was the founding principal of two transformational, award-winning magnets schools in the St. Paul (Minn.) Public Schools District: The World Cultures and Languages Magnet School and American Indian Magnet School. Cornel is also a former elementary teacher and principal on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. He now serves as educational consultant to numerous school districts across the country on improving the academic achievement of underrepresented populations in

education and faculty curriculum development. His research agenda is studying the psychological impact upon children's academic achievement caused by ethnic stereotyping.

Dr. Pewewardy has been the recipient of various honors and awards, including the 2001 and 1999 Big XII Outstanding Indian Faculty Member of the Year; 2000 Wordcrafter of the Year; 1994 Bush Principals' Leadership program, University of Minnesota; 1992 National Committee for School Desegregation Award; 1991 National Indian Educator of the Year and 1988 National Indian Student of the Year both from the National Indian Education Association. Dr. Pewewardy is a founding member of the National Association for Multicultural Education.