

# Playing Indian at Halftime

## *The Controversy over American Indian Mascots, Logos, and Nicknames in School-Related Events*

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Every school year, classroom teachers face the reality and challenge of educating diverse children in a multicultural society. Teaching multiculturally requires educators to examine sensitive, diverse topics and cultural issues. It means looking at historical and contemporary events from various perspectives, rather than a single one. Teachers and administrators whose knowledge of history and current events is monocultural in scope and who are unaware of their own prejudices are likely to hinder the academic success and personal development of many students, however unintentional this may be (Bennett 1999). Multicultural teaching encourages students to investigate the institutional racism, classism, and sexism that have served different populations in discriminatory ways. Educators can help monocultural classes and schools examine their own biases and stereotypes related to different cultural groups. Although one's ethnic group is just one of a number of possible identity sources, ethnicity is at the heart of the equity problem in American society. Therefore, discussions about achieving educational excellence should address those ethnic groups that have been consistently cut off from equal access to a quality education.

Educators have a professional responsibility to eliminate racism in all aspects of school life. Accordingly, educators should not ignore multicultural issues in school. Instead, these issues should become teachable moments in which these concerns are confronted and discussed. Accurate information can begin to displace the myths that many students hold about others. Today, one teachable moment is the controversy over using American Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames in school-related events. Supporters of such mascots claim they honor American Indian people, embody institutional traditions, foster a shared identity, and intensify the pleasures of sports and athletics. According to those who oppose them, however, the mascots give life to racial stereotypes, as well as revivify historical patterns of appropriation and oppression. These results often foster discomfort and pain among American Indian people (Springwood and King 2001).

Non-Indian people may not be culturally aware that some American Indian symbols used by cheerleaders and cheering fans—war chants, peace pipes, eagle feathers, war bonnets, and

dances—are highly revered or even sacred in many American Indian tribal communities. Many mascots, logos, and nicknames represent stereotypical and racist images that relegate American Indian people to a colonial representation history. The exploitation of Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames in schools is, in reality, an issue of decolonization and educational equity.<sup>1</sup>

This article discusses the creation of stereotypical Indian mascots, how our society reinforces and accepts those stereotypes, how negative stereotypes have affected the relationship between American Indians and the rest of society, and it suggests solutions educators might use to eliminate these mascots from school-related events. In writing this article, I hope not to demean schools but to provide a rationale and approach by which ethnocentrism, elitism, sexism, and racism effectively can be eradicated in schools.

## **Countering the Assault of American Indian Mascots, Logos, and Nicknames**

Using the word *countering*, which means to confront defensive or retaliatory attacks or arguments, to describe certain behaviors and thinking in our society is a strong indictment of the existing social fabric of the United States. Many educators in this country are serious players when it comes to countering racism, thereby protecting the mental health of school children today. However, many more teachers are unresponsive to or unaware of the issues of racism in schools today. Like these teachers, parents, educators, and liberals who deny being racists but remain silent when confronted with the issue also allow institutional racism to continue.

This issue has turned into a debate and torn schools and communities apart. Administrators spend months fending off angry alumni on both sides of the issue, calming students, and dealing with mainstream news media that oversimplify these issues. After it is all over, school districts often must spend additional time and energy healing the wounds and community ruptures left in the wake of efforts to counter institutional racism by

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eradicating American Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames in schools (Riede 2001).

### Still “Playing Indian” in School

Many schools around the country “play Indian” by exhibiting American Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames at sporting events: school bands play so-called “Indian” fight songs (for example, “One-little-two little-three-little Indians . . .”) during both pregame and halftime entertainment; mascots dress in stereotypical cartoon character-like costumes and beat hand drums and/or carry foam tomahawks; and fans do the “tomahawk chop”<sup>2</sup> in unison. These all are inauthentic representations of American Indian cultures. Many school officials claim they are honoring American Indians and insist that the activities are not offensive. I argue otherwise and contend that these racist activities are forms of cultural violence in schools (Pewewardy 1999; 2001).

After studying this issue for fifteen years, I found that groups outside the American Indian community imposed most Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames on athletic teams. Even in the earliest U.S. government boarding schools, Indian children had no involvement in choosing their schools’ mascots, logos, and nicknames. For example, the first recorded instance of an “Indian” nickname for a sports team was in 1894 at the Carlisle Indian School, an off-reservation U.S. government boarding school for American Indian students, located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Mainstream sports journalists praised the team’s football performance in the early years of their program. From 1894 until 1917, the Carlisle football team defeated the major power football team of the day (Adams 1995). Subsequently, opposing college football teams and sports media nicknamed team members the Carlisle “Indians.” Ironically, most American Indians have always opposed the use of “Indian” mascots, logos, and nicknames for sports teams. Yet, these traditions of doing so are enthusiastically supported by most European Americans (Muir 1999).

Although images of Indians in mainstream sports culture have become as American as apple pie and baseball, educators should be aware that American Indians never would have associated sacred practices with the hoopla of high school pep rallies and halftime entertainments.

### How American Indian Mascots, Logos, and Nicknames Become Racist

The unfortunate portrayal of Indian mascots in sports today takes many forms. Some teams use generic Indian names—such as Indians, Braves, Warriors, or Chiefs—while others adopt specific tribal names—such as 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 fake buckskin attire or skimpy loincloths. Some teams and supporters display counterfeit Indian

paraphernalia, including foam tomahawks, feathers, face paints, drums, and pipes. They also use mock “Indian” behaviors, such as the tomahawk chop, dances, war chants (for example, at Florida State University), drum beating, war-whooping, and symbolic scalping. Many European Americans rely on these manufactured images to anchor them to the land and verify a false account of a shared history. These “Indians,” however, exist only in the imagination: they provide a self-serving historical connection that leaves actual American Indian people untethered and rootless in or erased from the historical accounts of European Americans (Spindel 2000).

Many school officials are all too familiar with the current legal and educational battles toward eliminating Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames from school related events. The U.S. Commission of Civil Rights (CCR), the highest official governmental body of its kind, issued a strong statement in 2001 condemning their use and recommending that schools eliminate Indian images and nicknames as sports symbols (U.S. Department of Justice 2001). Grassroots efforts of thousands of American Indian parents nationwide prompted this decision among CCR members. Moreover, the critical mass of American Indian educational organizations and professionals supported the CCR statement. American Indian educators showed school officials that negative images, symbols, and behaviors play a crucial role in distorting and warping American Indian children’s cultural perceptions of themselves, as well as non-Indian children’s attitudes toward and simplistic understanding of American Indian culture. Hollywood scriptwriters originally manufactured most of these stereotypes. Over time, they have evolved into contemporary racist images that prevent millions of school-age students from understanding American Indians’ past and present experiences.

### How Stereotypical Images Impact Young Children’s Self-Esteem

Children begin to develop racial awareness at an early age, perhaps as early as three or four years old. Clinical psychologists have established that negative stereotypes and derogatory images engender and perpetuate undemocratic and unhealthy attitudes in children, plaguing them for years to come. Many non-Indian children exposed to these Hollywood stereotypes at early ages grow into adults who may unwittingly or unknowingly discriminate against American Indians. These children have been prevented from developing authentic, healthy attitudes about Indians. Moreover, Indian children who constantly see themselves being stereotyped and their cultures belittled grow into adults who feel and act inferior to other people. These racial and inauthentic behaviors mock Indian culture and cause many Indian youngsters to have low self-esteem and feel shame about their cultural identity. School environments should be places where students unlearn negative stereotypes that such mascots represent and promote. However, athletic events where Indian mascots are frequently used teach children the exact opposite.

Perhaps some people at these sporting events do not hear the foul language being shouted out in the stands and seating arenas associated with the usage of Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames. The most obvious offenses are the terms *redskins* (lady redskins) and *squaws*. According to one explanation, the word *redskin* originated in early colonial times when European colonists paid bounties for Indians' red skins—thereby coining the term *redskin*. The word *squaw* is a French corruption of the Iroquois word *otsiskwa*, meaning female properties. Both words are almost always used in a derogatory fashion in sporting events. Although these terms may be facing increasing social disdain, they certainly are far from dead. These words accentuate the differences in appearance, culture, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation of people and underplay—if not to deny—the similarities between people.

Given this background, no one, especially those associated with schools, should allow students to adopt a cartoon version of American Indian cultures as a mascot or logo. Educators and students need to be more educated about the negative effects of racist Indian mascots and logos on American Indian people. Many students do not recognize that the Indian mascot issue is as important in the American Indian community as alcoholism, substance abuse, and poverty. Some people excuse their ambivalence on the issue by saying there is “too much fuss over team names,” “we’re just having fun,” “we’re not harming anybody,” or “what’s the point?” They miss the connection because they are removed from the issues of American Indian education. It is hard to take American Indians seriously or to empathize with them when they are always portrayed as speaking in old, broken, stoic Indian clichés, such as “many moons ago”; dressed up in Halloween or Thanksgiving costumes; or acting crazy like a “bunch of wild Indians.” These make-believe Indians are prohibited from changing over time to be like real people. On athletic fields and in gymnasiums, they are denied the dignity of their tribal histories, the validity of their major contributions to modern American society, and the distinctiveness of their multiracial identities.

In 1998, Children Now initiated a study of children's perceptions of race and class in the media, focusing on images of American Indians presented in national news and entertainment. The Children Now study revealed similar results to the perceptions survey conducted by the League of Women Voters in 1975: most children in America view American Indians far removed from their own way of life.<sup>3</sup> Not only do these studies have to be conducted and their results disseminated, but the misconceptions and stereotypes about American Indian people, which bombard the child from outside of the classroom, need to be counteracted.

## Making Racism Visible in School-Related Events

Despite years of cultural diversity teacher training and integration of multicultural education lesson plans into the school curricula, children still play “cowboys and Indians” at some schools. Most teachers, undoubtedly, have seen (or perhaps

even supported) children running around in turkey feathers and cardboard headbands, carrying homemade bows and arrows, patting a hand against their mouth and yelling “woo-woo-woo,” or raising their hands over their shoulder and saying “how.” The perpetuation of these invented Indian behaviors reflects the influence of peer socialization, schooling, and mainstream movies. They mock American Indian cultural practices, demean actual human beings, and treat American Indian people as sub-humans incapable of verbal communication. This manufactured image of the Indian as something wild and inferior implies white superiority, a value judgment made namely by Hollywood scriptwriters (Rollins and O'Connor 1998).

Another popular character born of the racist images of American Indian people is the clown. Traditional clown societies of many tribes (for example, Apaches, Pueblos) attempt to make their people laugh during celebrations and ceremonies. On the other hand, the contemporary clown, born of American popular culture, is more like the jester or the fool, the inferior one responsible for making his superiors laugh. The use of clowns has always been a major way to assert dominance over a particular person or a certain group of people. During ball-games, the exaggerated images of Indians become clown-like, serving to manipulate and keep in place negative images during school-related events.

However, I hypothesize that the use of American Indian mascots in sporting events was influenced by the philosophical views of the Enlightenment and the developing Romantic movement. During those periods, American Indians were seen either as amusing exotics or as Noble Savages, excellent types for representing ideas in literature, in film, or on the stage. But the reality was that these figures were never more than white characters with cliché comic or noble personalities, thinly disguised in red skins and feathered costumes. American Indian people were never considered real human beings whose existence might be dramatically interesting (Jones 1988).

## Defensive Tactics and Attributes

Who should decide what is demeaning and racist? Clearly, the affected party determines what is offensive. Unaffected members of society should not dictate how the affected party should feel. Moreover, efforts to retire Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames should not be met with ugly alumni and student backlashes that label grassroots complainants as troublemakers, activist, militant, gadflies, or practitioners of political correctness. Therefore, educators who advocate and affirm cultural diversity must be ready for a challenge. Only a concerted effort to debunk Hollywood's mythology can alter the distorted image of the American Indian people for the better.

Educators should examine the biases and stereotypes their students hold. These stereotypes, caused by ignorance, hard times, and folk wisdom socialization, can be countered by accurate and culturally responsive information. Education can become a tool for liberation from bigotry—rather than a facilitator of racism (Corntassel n.d.).

## Large School Districts and Organizations as Trailblazers

Hope for change can be found in two large school districts in the United States. Both Dallas Public Schools and Los Angeles Public Schools have already eliminated Indian mascots from their school districts as the result of active parent and education advocacy groups working [together] with school officials. The states of Wisconsin and Minnesota also have recommended that publicly funded schools eliminate the use of Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames deemed offensive to American Indians.

Professional organizations dedicated to the unique problems of American Indians must take forthright positions on this issue as well. As a teacher educator, I show future teachers why Indian mascots are one cause of low self-esteem among American Indian children in schools. Throughout my practical experience working in K–8 schools, I have learned that self-esteem fuels academic performance. Educators must realize that this issue is detrimental to the academic achievement of all students. As such, negative Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames are harmful to both Indian and non-Indian students. American Indian students endure the psychological damage and dehumanizing effects of seeing caricatures of themselves embodied in school mascots, logos, and nicknames. It is no coincidence that American Indians have the highest suicide, school dropout, and unemployment rates of any ethnic group in the U.S. (Rider 1999). To illustrate my point, I refer to the mental health organizations that have rushed to support the elimination of negative Indian mascots used in schools (for example, the American Indian Mental Health Association of Minnesota in 1992 and the Society of Indian Psychologists of the Americas in 1999). They drafted statements condemning the presence of ethnic images as psychologically destructive to the minds of American Indian children. Other professional organizations that have passed resolutions in support of eliminating negative Indian mascots used in school-related activities and events include the National Indian Education Association, United Indian Nations of Oklahoma, Governors' Interstate Indian Council, Great Lakes Inter Tribal Council, National Congress of American Indians, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and National College Athletic Association.

Although such resolutions exist today, political and cultural leaders in many states (such as Oklahoma) have hundreds of Indian mascots and logos in use in school-related events but remain unconcerned with this national issue. They are uneducated about the issues or have little educational leadership to initiate transformational change toward truly honoring American Indians. Consequently, there is a critical need for experts to monitor more carefully these destructive influences in our shared physical, mental, social, and spiritual environments. Educators, parents, and community leaders must build coalitions to preserve the reality of our shared history. Educators must develop educational materials, artistic productions, economic structures, fashions, and concepts that counteract these damaging stereotypes.

## What Must Be Done

The recognition of embedded racism in the English language is an important first step. Consciousness of the influence of language on our perceptions can help negate much of that influence. But it is not enough to simply be aware of the effects of racist language in conditioning attitudes. Although society may not be able to change the entire language, educators can help students change their use of many unkind words. Educators should not use degrading and dehumanizing words and should make a conscious effort to use terminology that reflects a progressive, rather than distorting, perspective. Most important, educators should provide students with opportunities to increase their cultural awareness by exploring racism in language and also should teach terminology that is culturally responsive and does not perpetuate negative human values and experiences.

To correct these negative stereotypes, concerned individuals or groups should consult the local school Title IX Indian Education Program coordinator, curriculum specialist, cultural resource librarian, university professor, or the National Indian Education Association to assist in the elimination of negative ethnic images and materials from the academic curriculum and school-related events. Some complainants of Indian mascots and logos have also filed complaints with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Every public school district is required to have a complaint procedure adopted by the school board for residents to use.

One of the finest award-winning reference books on this topic is *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children* by Arlene Hirschfelder, Paulette Fairbanks Molin, and Yvonne Wakim (1999). Robert Eurich also maintains a comprehensive Web site on American Indian sports teams mascots at <http://earnestman.tripod.com/fr.2001.retrospective.htm>. This Web site tracks all schools that have Indian names as well as those schools that have been changed to a non-Indian mascots.<sup>4</sup>

Every school year, American Indian students, parents, educators, and other allies must continue the hard work to educate our young people and us about how Indian mascots are used in school-related events. We must find every opportunity to celebrate ourselves, challenging the fear that causes us to hesitate in taking control of our own ethnic images. We must work together and have faith that our struggle will be successful, regardless of the opposition.

## Conclusion

The ongoing use of Indian mascots in school-sponsored events is an issue of educational equity. Therefore, my professional challenge is to educators. 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. By tolerating the use of demeaning stereotypes in our public schools, we further desensitize entire generations of children (Milner 1991, 67). As a result, schools reinforce the stereotypical negative images projected in the broader mainstream American cultural imagination. Sport teams with Indian mascots, logos, and

nicknames teach them that it is acceptable to demean a race or group of people through American sports culture. Educators must turn the use of these mascots, logos, and nicknames into powerful teaching moments that could help counter the fabricated images and manufactured pictures of Indians that most school-age children have ingrained in their psyche by one hundred years of mass media. Finally, I challenge administrators and policymakers to provide the intellectual school leadership that truly embraces multicultural education, helping to eliminate the cultural violence associated with and triggered by the use of American Indian mascots in school-related events.

As a former kindergarten teacher and principal, I have a profound respect and admiration for teachers and administrators. The work they do is honorable, although rarely cherished. At the same time, I recognize that many teachers and administrators have not been given the time or support to help them teach in the most culturally responsive way. I hope this explanation of why educators should not ignore Indian mascots is a tool both teachers and administrators can use to help children think critically about multicultural issues in another school year.

## Notes

1. Many of the contemporary Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames of today originated at the turn of the twentieth century. However, crude stereotyping of these ethnic characters became more and more obvious as the first half of the century progressed, even surviving the social reconstruction of the Civil Rights Era.
2. The tomahawk chop is a social phenomenon created by those sports fans who perceive the need for a supportive physical display of action to cheer on the favored athletic team. It is the extension of a single arm out in front on an individual—swinging the hand and forearm in an up and down motion. The act of the tomahawk chop usually takes place in large crowds in sport stadiums accompanied by a so-called Indian war chant. The tomahawk perpetuates the negative stereotype of the Noble Savage that falsely represents American Indians, and it certainly is not reflective of modern America.
3. See Children Now: Native American children's perceptions of race and class in the media. <http://www.childrennow.org/media/nativeam/report.html>.
4. See Robert Eurich's Web site dedicated to educating individuals about Indian mascots. <http://members.tripod.com/earnestman/getinvolved.htm>.

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