



Students Do Not Need to be Pretendians to Learn about Native American Heritage and History

By Educator Barnes – November 10, 2021

Native American history is American history. It should be covered throughout the year and not only in November during Native American Heritage Month. However, teachers must take the time to learn about the various tribes or Native nations they want to cover in their classroom. Many activities teachers used to teach about Native Americans were not appropriate in the past, and they are still not appropriate today.

First, when teaching about Native Americans, it must be understood that Native Americans are not a monolith. Although some areas may overlap among some Native groups, each group has its own unique story. Children should not go home and say they learned about Native Americans; they should be able to specifically state which group they learned about.

When teachers understand that Native Americans are not a monolith, they will become informed about items that people associate with Native Americans such as dream catchers. When you look up dream catchers in the Merriam-Webster dictionary the definition states they are, “used by some American Indian peoples.” In the book “Do All Indians Live in Tipis? Questions and Answers from the National Museum of the American Indian,” readers learn that dream catchers can be traced back to the Anishinaabe. Anishinaabe is their chosen name. They are also known as Chippewa or Ojibwe (or Ojibwa or Ojibway). The dream catchers are placed above children’s bed to thwart evil. According to the book, traditional Anishinaabe dream catchers are not meant to last a long time and the shape is not a perfect circle. They are irregular circles or teardrop shaped.

If students learn about an item associated with Native Americans, they should know which Native peoples the items is tied to. For dream catchers, teachers can review the brief information on Britannica. Additionally, the teacher can pull information from the book “Chippewa” by Frances Densmore. Densmore, an ethnomusicologist, studied various Native peoples including the Anishinaabe. If the school is in proximity to an Anishinaabe band (a division), the school should build relationships to have students interact with members. This will also help students know that Native Americans aren’t only historical figures and are still alive today. If that is not possible, reading the book “Grandmother’s Dreamcatcher” by Becky Ray McCain could also be an option.

Although some Native Americans are okay with dream catchers being sold which some use for profit to live, others believe they are sacred. Items being sacred extends beyond dream catchers. Native American regalia is not a costume. Students should not make headbands with feathers to simulate a headdress. Students also do not need a Native American name to study about Native Americans. It is more important that students learn the history behind how and why Native Americans choose the names they have chosen rather than have students do an activity to pretend to have a Native American name. Any pretendian activity should not occur. There are rituals associated with items. Teachers should not make a mockery of those rituals, and teachers should not have students dress like Native Americans.

The best teachers of Native American Heritage are Native Americans in the community. If schools ask for local Native Americans to speak to students about their culture, they should pay and properly compensate them for their time. Other speakers are compensated when they come to schools and so should Native American speakers.

Native Americans are still here, and they still need more inclusion in the school curriculum. It has to be done in a way that is not offensive, but also in a way that gives the full picture for students.