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## PART I: ADVANCING THE CONVERSATION

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### Why Educators Should Not Ignore Indian Mascots

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#### Introduction

I have spent my entire adult life as a teacher and administrator in elementary schools that serve American Indian<sup>1</sup> children. From that perspective, I believe that the use of Indian mascots is a symptom of “dysconscious racism” and a form of cultural violence that operates at the psychological level. King (1991) and King and Ladson-Billings (1990) suggested that *dysconscious racism* is a form of racism that unconsciously accepts dominant White norms and privileges. For example, if you have seen the racial antics and negative behaviors portrayed by Indian mascots hundreds of times throughout your life, you may become desensitized to their presence. The thousands of ways in which Indian mascots are used today in American sports culture are racist and should be eliminated.

Contrived media images distort the perceptions of millions of Americans in their understanding of the past and the current authentic human experience of indigenous peoples of the Americas. My response to the use of Indian mascots for sports teams has consistently been to argue that these trappings and seasonal insults offend the dignity and denigrate the thousands of American Indians in this country. This article speaks to American educators and discusses how, as educators, we are responsible for maintaining the ethics of teaching and for helping to eliminate racism in all aspects of school life. In this view, eradicating Indian mascots has become an issue of educational equity. In this article, I address the insidious ways that Indian mascots have been used to legitimate the conquest of American Indians and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Here I offer strategies that organizations can

use in developing policies to eliminate Indian mascots from school-related activities.

#### The Issues

The challenge that educators have today is to deconstruct a reality that has been created by the American media and by scholars from a cultural base, which includes racism. For many Americans, there is something faintly anachronistic about contemporary American Indian people. Many people today look at Indians as figures out of the past, as relics of a more heroic age. Unfortunately, the contemporary Indian person has been hard to grasp by most Americans. It is only recently that Indian people have begun to reclaim their own cultural images and make their special presence known in American society. American Indians would never have associated the sacred practices of becoming a warrior with the hoopla of a sports pep rally or half-time athletic entertainment, or to being a sidekick to cheerleaders. Schools should be places where students come to unlearn the stereotypes that such mascots represent.

Many schools around the country exhibit Indian mascots and logos; many use nicknames and do the “tomahawk chop”<sup>2</sup> in sports venues, with inauthentic representations of American Indian cultures. Many school officials claim they are honoring Indians and insist their schools’ sponsored activities are not offensive but, rather,

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<sup>2</sup>The “tomahawk chop” is a social phenomena that was created by those individuals who perceive the need for a supportive physical display of action (to cheer on one’s favorite athletic team). It’s 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 perpetuates an image of savagery and usually takes place in large crowds in sports stadiums accompanied by a so-called Indian war chant. The tomahawk chop is also a racist gesture because it perpetuates a stereotype that is not true for all indigenous peoples, and it certainly is not true in modern America.

This invented act of cheerleading plays on the transformation of indigenous spirituality, knowledge, objects, rituals into commodities, and commercial exploitation, as well as constitute a concrete manifestation of the more general, and chronic, marketing of Native America (Whitt, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup>There is no universally accepted term for the peoples native to North America. Indian, Native American, and American Indian are all unsatisfactory terms, for indicating the diversity of tribal nations existing in the area which is now the United States. That said, Native American, American Indian, Native, and Indian are used interchangeably as a common vernacular in this article.

a compliment. I argue otherwise. There is nothing in American Indian cultures that aspires to be a mascot, logo, or nickname for athletic teams. This would be tantamount to fans using authentic saints as mascots or fans dressing as the Pope (Lady Popes or Nuns) at a New Orleans Saints football game. What would be the reaction of Roman Catholics around the country to the use of the “crucifix chop,” accompanied by Gregorian chants, and the wearing of colorful religious attire by fans?

This fan behavior makes a mockery of Indian cultural identity and causes many youngsters to feel shame about who they are as human beings, because racial stereotypes play an important role in shaping a young person’s consciousness. 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.

### How Children Construct Race

Children’s self-images are very impressionable, pliable, and susceptible to external forces, especially if they are steeped in violent and negative images (Fleming, 1996; Madsen & Robbins, 1981; Pushkin & Veness, 1973; Rouse & Hanson, 1991). They also respond accordingly to the respect they are shown in regard to their individuality, including their ethnicity or race (Paley, 1989). Unfortunately, for American Indians, many false images of ethnicity still dominate the consciousness of the American psyche.

Ramsey (1995) suggested that the importance of racial figures in children’s perceptions of themselves and others depends, in part, on their majority or minority status in their local community and on the extent and quality of contacts that they have with other racial groups. During their elementary school years, children develop more complex racial views as they begin to associate social information, such as the status of different groups, with their physical attributes (Katz, 1976). As this shift occurs, children see race less in terms of purely physical differences and begin to grasp the social meaning of racial terms and to learn the prevailing stereotypes (Alejandro-Wright, 1985). Children who have differently forming flexible and multifaceted categories in general more readily acquire rigid stereotypes and are more resistant to changing them (Bigler & Liben, 1993). For Indian youth, as well as for other minority and underrepresented groups of students, administrative policy should emphasize a culturally responsive school climate to improve the children’s self-identities (Pewewardy, 1989). Furthermore, Bartolome and Macedo (1997) argued that academia needs to understand that the popular press and the mass media educate more people about issues regarding ethnicity and race than all other sources of education available to U.S. citi-

zens. By shunning the mass media, educators are missing the obvious, that is, that more public education is done by the media than by teachers, professors, or anyone else. This would serve to develop further the link between education and the issues discussed so far. I believe that the use of Indian mascots in schools contributes to the need for current discourse in education around ethnicity and race.

### Unkind Words in Sports Culture

So why do some educators allow their students to uncritically adopt a cartoon version of an Indian culture through the use of a mascot portrayed by sports teams? Dennis (1981) contended that people engage in racist behavior because they are reasonably sure that there is support for it within their society. Their cultural lens, for example, may be highly ethnocentric, yet no distortions are perceived in the field of vision. To understand why this is racist, consider how euphemisms and code words for ethnic persons and groups are used: scalp, massacre, redskin, squaw, noble savage, papoose, Pocahontas, Cherokee princess. Bosmajian (1983) explained that although the state and church as institutions have defined the Indians into subjugation, the use of a suppressive language by society at large has perpetuated the dehumanization of Indian people. The English language includes various phrases and words that relegate Indians to an inferior status: “The only good Indian is a dead Indian,” “Indian giver,” “drunken Indians,” “dumb Indians,” and “Redskins.”<sup>3</sup> These words represent a new generation of ethnic slurs that are replacing the older, more blatant and abusive nicknames (Allen, 1990; Moore, 1976).

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

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<sup>3</sup>“Redskins” is a word that should remind every American there was a time in United States history when America paid bounties for human beings. There was a going rate for the scalps or hides of indigenous men, women, and children. These “redskin” trophies could be sold to most frontier trading posts.

“Redskins” as used by the Washington National League football team, was a poor choice from the beginning. It was an unflattering name given to indigenous peoples by European Americans. George Preston Marshall selected the name when he organized the Boston-based team in 1933. The fact that the name has become habitual or traditional for today’s sports fans make it no more pleasant to indigenous peoples who hear it.

such as the tomahawk chop, dances, chants, drum-beating, war-whooping, and symbolic scalping. In essence, so-called Indian mascots reduce hundreds of tribal members to generic cartoon characters.

### **How Indian Mascots Are Detrimental to Children**

Today, as a teacher educator, I seek to convince future teachers why Indian mascots are one cause for low self-esteem and low self-concept in Indian children. Knowing that self-esteem is the generator of academic performance in young children, low self-esteem and low self-concept are the points in which this issue becomes detrimental to the academic achievement of students. For evidence, I point to the American Indian Mental Health Association of Minnesota (1992) position statement, which supports the elimination of Indian mascots and logos from schools:

As a group of mental health providers, we are in agreement that using images of American Indians as mascots, symbols, caricatures, and namesakes for non-Indian sports teams, businesses, and other organizations is damaging to the self-identity, self-concept, and self-esteem of our people. We should like to join with others who are taking a strong stand against this practice. (p. 1)

A similar position statement by the Society of Indian Psychologists of the Americas was drafted by Mary Clearing-Sky (1999).

Most of the resolutions to eliminate negative ethnic images came from grassroots people, mostly Indian parents. Resolutions to ban Indian mascots and logos from schools also have been drafted by American Indian organizations like the National Indian Education Association, Kansas Association for Native American Education, Wisconsin Indian Education Association, and Minnesota Indian Education Association. Other groups that have passed resolutions to ban Indian mascots and logos include the National Education Association, Governor's Interstate Indian Council, United Indian Nations of Oklahoma, Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council in Wisconsin, Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin, National Congress of American Indians, American Indian Movement, National Rainbow Coalition, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Center for the Study of Sports in Society. More recently, the National Collegiate Athletic Association has issued a statement supporting the elimination of Indian names and mascots as symbols for their member institutions' sports teams (Whitcomb, 1998). Yet, these strong voices seemingly speak to deaf ears. As a result, the continued eroticization of people of color, particularly American Indians, has been used to justify the control of entire communities (Kivel, 1996).

### **Power, Control, and Colonization**

The concept of power has an important position in the conceptualization of motivation and social interaction in sports (Kleiber, 1980). Because the powerful messages from state and national organizations have been ignored, the question must be asked: Why do racial slurs in the form of Indian mascots and logos remain? I believe that the hidden agenda behind their use is about cultural and spiritual annihilation and about intellectual exploitation. Therefore, the real issues are about power and control. Those who want to define other ethnic groups and control their images to have people believe that their truth is the absolute truth drive these negative ethnic images. Furthermore, they have the ability to define a reality and to get other people to affirm that reality as if it were their own. Remember that media commercials are carefully designed and expensively produced to stereotype groups and help us, as consumers, "realize" we are far less intelligent than we should be. This is an addictive systemic approach to power and control.

Moreover, through the politics of colonization, indigenous peoples were socialized into stereotypes of inferiority, stupidity, and laziness, thereby fulfilling the need to be everybody's mascot. This list of stereotypes of American Indians is well known (e.g., the University of Illinois' Chief Illinawic, Oklahoma's Eskimo Joes, Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, Land of Lakes Butter, Jeep Cherokee, Pocahontas).

### **Mascot Names Change**

Although the Florida State University Seminoles, the Southeastern Oklahoma State University Savages, the Wichita North High School Redskins, and many more academic institutions have resisted the pressure to change, scores of colleges, universities, and high school teams have adopted new names over the years. Stanford changed from the Indians to the "Cardinals." Dartmouth changed from Indians to "The Big Green." Ohio's Miami University Redskins became the "Red Hawks." The Oklahoma City University Chiefs are now the "Stars." If these colleges and universities can change, so can other educational institutions. In the Big Ten Conference, the University of Wisconsin and University of Minnesota athletic departments established policies that banned out-of-conference competition with universities that use Indian mascot names and logos (e.g., the Marquette Warriors, who recently changed their name to "Golden Eagles").

Several newspapers, including the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Seattle Times*, *Portland Oregonian*, and *Duluth News-Tribune*, have instituted new policies on the use of racist overtones and words, such as "Redskin," in its reporting, particularly of sports events. Moreover, some

radio announcers and stations will not use racially insulting words over the air.

Some large school districts across the nation (e.g., Dallas public schools and Los Angeles public schools) have eliminated Indian mascots from their school districts, as the result of active parent and education groups working closely with school officials. Wisconsin and Minnesota have recommended that publicly funded schools not use mascots, names, or logos that have been deemed offensive to Indians.

Although some colleges, universities, high schools, and middle schools have dropped their racially insulting Indian mascots and logos, no professional sports team have felt the pressure of political correctness or have enough conscience, sensitivity, or respect to take a similar step. One exception is the Washington Wizards, who succumbed to the political pressure to change their mascot from the Bullets to the Wizards, which suggests that changes are possible at that level. Change should be possible without the “unsightful” alumni and student backlashes that smear Indian complainants as activists or militants—and even as politically correct minorities. This is not the current fad of being “politically correct.”

### Students' Right to an Equal Education

Most states make a commitment to provide the best public education for every student. Given this foundation, many of the issues pertaining to negative Indian mascots and logos displayed in school programs and activities come under the category of “discrimination.” The discrimination prohibition applies to curricular programs, extracurricular activities, pupil services, recreational programs, among other areas (e.g., use of facilities and food service). Although most states prohibit discrimination against students, many of those who initially complain about Indian mascots and logos are dismissed as irrelevant by school officials; therefore, they follow up through a process of filing an official complaint as an “aggrieved person” (i.e., a student or parent of student who has been negatively affected) who resides in the school district.

Every public school district is required to have a complaint procedure adopted by the school board for residents to use. Some complainants of Indian mascots and logos also have filed complaints with the U.S. Department of Education (Office for Civil Rights, Chicago office), basing their allegation of discrimination on the student's gender, race, handicap, color, or national origin.

### Conclusion

For both American Indians and for mainstream America, understanding contemporary images, perceptions, and myths of American Indians is extremely im-

portant. Most images of Indians have been burned into the global consciousness by 50 years of mass media. It was the Hollywood screenwriters who helped to create the “frontier myth” image of Indians. It was, moreover, a revelation that largely went unrecorded by the national media and unnoticed by a public that still sees Indians mainly through deeply xenophobic eyes and the mythic veil of mingled racism and romance. Therefore, each new generation of popular culture has reinvented its Indian mascot in the image of its own era.

Those of us who advocate for the elimination of Indian mascots appreciate the courage, support, and sometimes the sacrifice of all people who stand with us by speaking out and drafting resolutions against the continued use of Indian mascots in schools. When you advocate for the removal of these mascots and logos, you strengthen the spirit of tolerance and social justice in your community, and you model pluralism for all children. You provide a powerful teaching moment that can help to deconstruct the fabricated images and misconceptions of Indians that most school-age children have burned into their psyche by the American media.

In this article, I have made several points concerning the misuse of Indian mascots in school-related activities and provided many possible solutions to this problem. Today, educators need to educate themselves about American Indians and their communities. Doing so will help them see that as long as such negative mascots and logos remain within the arena of school activities, both Indian and non-Indian children are learning to tolerate racism in schools (B. Munson, personal communication, October 14, 1998). That is what children see at school and on television. As a result, schools only reinforce the images projected by popular culture (LaRocque, 1997). This is precisely what sports teams with mascots and logos of Indians teach them—that it is “acceptable” racism to demean a race or group of people through American sports culture. Finally, I challenge educators to provide the intellectual leadership that will teach a critical perspective and illuminate the cultural violence associated with Indian mascots used in schools. That is why educators should not and cannot ignore the use of Indian mascots.

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