

School Murals Should Reflect Racial Equality and Celebrate Cultural Diversity

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Research Question

How can Hodgkin Elementary School (HES) update its murals to reflect and celebrate the cultural diversity of the school?

Rationale

I am very passionate about ensuring that my students are educated in history through accurate and multiple perspectives of history. I also want to ensure that my students are educated on historical figures and historical events in a culturally respectful manner. I am dedicated to ending racism by ensuring that my students learn to celebrate and embrace cultural diversity.

After having been approached at our November 2020 Instructional Council meeting by our Indian Education teacher and one of our third-grade teachers about wanting to update our murals, I supported their efforts to get these murals changed. They presented us with information on why the Native American murals at my school are outdated, historically inaccurate, and culturally insensitive. I wanted to see what staff and community sentiments are with regards to the murals being historically inaccurate, outdated, and culturally insensitive.

Literature Review

The Annenberg Learner Website has a great collection of brief articles that discuss the portrayal of history in artwork. The one that I'm going to review to start my research is "When it comes to art, how do we define historical accuracy? This article gave excellent questions to consider. One of the questions it asks an art observer to consider is: How do you think an image created soon after an event differs from one created with greater hindsight? Another question to consider when looking at historical artwork is how does each of these images relate to the event it depicts? A final question to consider is: are photographs more realistic or true to the events depicted? Is this accurate? Why or why not? This article was a great starting point for my research. I will look at more articles on this website.

The Murals in question were painted by William "Bill" Warder. Warder was a local New Mexican artist and muralist. The murals found to be culturally insensitive, inaccurate, and/or outdated were those of Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill, Esteban and Cabeza De Baca, Columbus, The Pilgrims, Land Bridge, Shalako, and White House Ruins.

Murals or any artistic portrayal of Kit Carson are culturally insensitive to Native Americans, especially members of the Navajo Nation.

Buffalo Bill Cody is despised by Native Americans. Therefore, having a mural of him is culturally insensitive. Buffalo Bill was a soldier, Indian fighter, buffalo hunter, and showman. According to the article, "The Truth Behind Buffalo Bill's Scalping Act", Cody's gruesome act is the first thing that won him widespread fame, and it was so popular that he included a reenactment of it in most of his early Wild West shows.

The mural of the land bridge is historically inaccurate. According to history.com, Archaeological studies have found that human colonization of North America by the so-called Clovis culture dates back more than 13,000 years ago, and recent archaeological evidence suggests that people could have been on the continent 14,700 years ago and possibly even several millennia before that. "The route taken by the first humans coming to America is still unknown, but much evidence points to the Pacific coast," says study co-author Mikkel Winther Pedersen, a Ph.D. student at the Centre for GeoGenetics at the University of Copenhagen.

The Shálako mural depicts a sacred Pueblo festival. According to <https://ehillerman.unm.edu/>, In the tradition of the Zuni people of the American Southwest, Shalako refers to both an annual winter solstice ceremony, as well as to spirit deities perceived as giant, beaked messengers to the gods.

The Pilgrims mural is an inaccurate depiction of the first Thanksgiving. According to the article "The Thanksgiving Tale We Tell Is a Harmful Lie."

The Cabeza de Baca and Esteban Mural is culturally inappropriate. Cabeza de Baca was a conquistador who conquered Native Americans. He also had an African slave named Esteban.

The Christopher Columbus mural is culturally inappropriate towards Native Americans. He mistreated the Taino Indians of Hispaniola and they were massacred. Native Americans in the US advocated for the Columbus holiday to be renamed Indigenous Peoples' Day. Columbus viewed the Taíno themselves as a way to amass his personal wealth.

The White House Ruins Mural is a natural moment on Pueblo Land. It contains sacred drawings.

Study Design and Research

I based my information and research for this paper on the following items. The first item was the presentation and updates on the murals made at our Instructional Council Meetings. I used my own research on why these murals would be considered outdated, inaccurate, and/or culturally insensitive. Finally, I considered the questions in my literature review to determine if these murals are outdated.

Data Analysis

Our principals, Instructional Council, school, and neighborhood were all in support of having the murals painted over. The Indian education teacher at HES contacted the director of Indian of Education at APS to find out who could come and repaint the murals at my school. Our principal talked to the president of the neighborhood association to see what the community sentiment was on the murals and what role they would play in the process to update the murals.

At our December 2020 Instructional Council meeting, we were updated that the Principal had spoken with the president of our neighborhood association and was given approval to paint over the murals. Our Indian Education Teacher also got approval from the district to paint the murals. We voted unanimously, 13-0, in support of archiving and painting over the murals. The staff was notified at the January 2021 staff meeting of the decision to paint over the murals. Our 1st grade Instructional Council representative archived the murals by taking pictures of them. Painting over these murals is an important gesture of continuing to show cultural sensitivity and celebrate diversity.

At HES we have a population of 502 students as of April, 2020. According to our Indian Education Teacher, we currently have 121 Native American students, which accounts for 24.1% of our student population. We have a wonderful diversity of Pueblo and Navajo students and we owe it to them to celebrate their cultures and represent Native American culture in an historically accurate and respectful manner.

Next Steps

What are the next steps for replacing the murals at HES? Our principal and Indian Education teacher received approval from the neighborhood association, APS, and HES Instructional Council to archive and paint over the murals. A timeline needs to be determined for when this will happen. I would love for administration to get input from the HES staff on what will replace the outdated murals. I personally would love to see HES have brand new murals that reflect our culturally diverse population that respectfully represent each culture represented by our staff and students.

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