Narrator:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson:

When members of a majority group adopt a cultural element of a minority group in a disrespectful, stereotypical, or exploitative way, that is cultural appropriation. In the last several years, many people have opened their eyes to this practice, taking notice, and making changes in order to show respect and spread inclusivity. We need to make more progress. I’m Nicki Donnelson. Today on the Missouri State Journal, I’m speaking with Dr. Kayla Lewis, associate professor of literacy at Missouri State University. She's a member of the Chickasaw Nation out of Oklahoma and her heritage leads her to proclaim the importance of offering accurate depictions of Native people both past and present.

Dr. Kayla Lewis:

A lot of books that were published pre-2000, pre-2010 are serving to reinforce stereotypes of Native American people rather than showing history as it actually was. It sugarcoats things, it glosses over the atrocities, it stereotypes that all Native Americans wore feather head dresses, roamed the plains, hunted buffalo, when only 3% of Native American people actually were in that population. So, a lot of books, like I said, that were published a long time ago aren’t as culturally accurate as books are now. So, we see that a lot of the more current publications in children’s literature do a better job of representing Native people both in the past and in the present. And bringing that present to the present is really important to show that Native people are still here, and we are still a part of society and a part of culture, and we do still have traditions that we are upholding.

Nicki Donnelson:

With over 500 Native tribes currently, Lewis said that it’s important to note that no one piece of literature will represent the incredible diversity available within Native cultures. That’s one more reason that Native American literature should be widely available and not just highlighted in one month of year.

Dr. Kayla Lewis:

We introduce topics related to Native people in elementary classroom through teaching it all year long. Not focusing it just during November when it’s Native American Heritage Month and teaching Native Americans just around Thanksgiving, that tends to just reinforce the stereotype. And so, I encourage the use of multicultural literature and Native American literature throughout the school year to give students a broader perspective and to help break some of those stereotypes that are in place.

Nicki Donnelson:

Lewis works to spread awareness about cultural appropriation of Native people at diversity conferences, classes, and in trainings worldwide. One hot topic is the use of Native people or symbols in athletics or as mascots. She tells us more.

Dr. Kayla Lewis:

It is something that is considered cultural appropriation and it’s not something that Native people want to see. We see it as – a lot of people say, “We’re just honoring the heritage”, but when you think about other races, other cultures, we don’t have them as mascots and if we did think of some of the racial terms or different cultures, and we put them in a mascot, it would be seen as very offensive. Yet, for some reason, it’s okay if we do that with Native people. Here, specifically in Springfield, we have – I have seen posters in elementary schools that feed into Kickapoo. And they have Kickapoo and Cherokee and some of the other different middle schools and all of the elementary schools, and the poster has all of these schools on little teepee’s and none of the – there's three tribes listed of the school’s here in Springfield and none of them actually lived in teepee’s. And so, it’s just reinforcing that stereotype. There are slogans like “fear the spear” for one of the schools which it just doesn’t settle well. Like you shouldn’t be fearing Native people and reinforcing violence and things like that. So, no, it’s definitely not something that we like to see as mascots, and thankfully, even at the national level, we’re starting to see some change, we’re starting to see sports teams change their mascots because they have come to realize that it’s not appropriate. And so, hopefully, that trickle down will happen into other parts of the United States and other areas.

Nicki Donnelson:

The encouraging thing for Lewis is that when people speak up change does happen. She's noticed this in some schools and in many other realms. “Mitigating this cultural appropriation is critical,” she points out, “because native people are still thriving all around us”.

Dr. Kayla Lewis:

If you google “Native American”, most of the images you see are pre-1900, and so, it’s something that a lot of schools, a lot of community people see in the past and they don’t see that we are still here in the present. And so, I think just bringing in awareness to teachers on how to teach that Native people are still here and we’re still making contributions and we still have a thriving culture that’s alive and well. To bring that bridge to the present I think is really important and I think it’s something for people to be aware of as well.

Nicki Donnelson:

That was Dr. Kayla Lewis. I’m Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Narrator:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.