
Working with Native American Students

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"We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don't even know they exist?"³
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What is Culturally Relevant /Responsive Education?
This pedagogy places an emphasis on teachers understanding their students' backgrounds. Not all students will have the same opportunities in schools, and they won't have the same interaction with schools and teachers. Culturally responsive education encourages teachers to learn more about their students and be mindful of how history, biases, and discrimination impact their students in the classroom.
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This handout provides a basic introduction to working with Native American students. For a more in-depth resource, please go to the Summer Reads website to learn more!
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What History Should I Know About?

1800s through the 1960s: The US government and Christian missionaries created boarding schools for Native American children and forced them to attend. Children were separated from families, tribes, and culture. They were forced to wear Western clothing, punished for speaking Tribal languages, and above all, were taught that indigenous culture is shameful and inferior. The government hoped that separating Native children from tribes would end the resistance to forced relocation and make the children into assimilated Americans.⁴

1924: Native Americans were granted citizenship and the right to vote. They were now citizens under both the national and tribal governments. Tribes have a Sovereign Nation status.⁵

Today: There are 560+ federally recognized tribes and almost 245 non-federally recognized tribes. Tribal nations are Sovereign Nations with their own elections, citizens, and laws. Before tribes were forced to relocate to the current reservation system, there were different American Indian communities throughout North America. When the reservation system was enacted (in the late 1800s), some bands and tribes were forced to live together that may have been culturally and linguistically very different or even enemies.⁴

The Native American community in the Twin Cities is a modern, thriving community with many community led organizations and agencies that are assisting individuals in their daily lives. There is a longer list of resources available on the Summer Reads web, but some you might consider learning more about are: the American Indian Magnet School, Little Earth housing community, the St. Paul American Indian Education Programs, and Phillips Indian Educators.

Myths and Facts:

Myth: All Native Americans live on reservations.

Fact: Native Americans now live in urban areas. Today, there are more Natives living off the reservations than on them. They are modern people and are not “stuck in the past.”²

Myth: Only Dakota and Ojibwe peoples live in the Twin Cities.

Fact: There are 50-60+ tribes represented in the Twin Cities, and more than 50 in the St. Paul Public Schools.²

Myth: If a child “looks” like a Native American, he or she has a strong connection with the culture.

Fact: Some Native students might have a strong cultural link to a nation or tribe, but some might not, even if they “look” Native. It is important not to make assumptions about the level of Native culture a student and his family hold onto, or to assume which tribe he is from.⁵

Cultural Elements:

- Do not demand that a child gives you eye contact, as some do not see it as being respectful, but as a challenge.^{2,5}
- Community and time to work together are highly valued in the classroom.⁶
- A sense of calmness and consistency is very important in a classroom or community space.⁵
- It is important to pay attention to gestures, as a lot of communication can come through non-verbals.⁴
- Reading enrichment begins with storytelling in a structure that tends to be different than the Western European story structure.⁷ Their stories seek to convey a message and are traditionally told night after night.³

| Do | Don't |
|---|---|
| Be aware of your own perspective and thoughts on Native Americans. Are they true, false, myths, or stereotypes? ² | Assume that you don't have any Native children in your class. ² |
| Talk about race in a respectful way. It is the only way we are going to understand one another. ⁵ | Assume that a child is from a tribe just because of the location he or she is from, as families can move away from their registered tribe. ² |
| Be aware of the power you have when working with children, and be a power of change. ² | Put any judgment on what Native children say. They can feel a disconnect if you do and may never bring it up again. ⁵ |
| Present Native peoples as separate from each other, with unique cultures, languages, spiritual beliefs, and dress. ¹ | Have children make “Indian crafts” unless you know authentic methods and have authentic materials. ¹ |
| Bring in books and texts that show modern day Natives and reflect how and where they currently live. ⁵ | Use materials which present as heroes only those Native people who aided Europeans. ¹ |
| Be very genuine and sincere. Say something like: “I understand that you are American Indian. I think that is very special because ____.” ² | Mention distant Native American/Alaskan Native relatives in an attempt to establish rapport unless you have maintained a connection to that tribe. ⁴ |

References:

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5. Downwind, J. (2016, July 15). Native American Culture [Personal interview].
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7. Lee, L., & LaFloe, J. (2016, July 22). Native American Culture [Personal interview].