

7-2015

Intersections of Identity and Cultural Competency: A White Teacher in a Tribal School

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INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY: A WHITE
TEACHER IN A TRIBAL SCHOOL

Diane Wright

July 2015

ABSTRACT

The author recently accepted a third grade position at Chief Leschi Schools in Puyallup, Washington. In this paper, she seeks to become culturally responsive to her future students by examining her own exposure to native cultures, the history of tribal education, and relevant research. She reflects on her role at Chief Leschi, and questions her authority in teaching, per Washington State Common Core Standards for third grade social studies, past and present native cultures. She concludes with commitments for her practice in the next year, and new realizations concerning her personal pedagogy.

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CULTURAL COMPETENCY

In *Teacher Characteristics for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*, authors Laura Rychly and Emily Graves (2012) discuss diversity in American public schools and how teachers should respond and interact with diversity in the classroom. Rychly and Graves (2012) distinguish “culturally responsive pedagogy” (45) as separate from “multicultural education” (45). While multicultural education, they claim, is a blanket of cultural instruction that may or may not be relevant to one’s specific students, culturally responsive teaching “must respond to the cultures actually present in the classroom” (45). True culturally responsive teaching comes from recognizing your students’ cultures and backgrounds and presenting every subject, not just culture, through a lens they will understand. Responsiveness to specific students and groups of students creates competent teachers who are able to operate effectively in the classroom.

The idea of cultural competency is defined by The National Education Association (2015) as:

Having an awareness of one’s own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families. It is the ability to understand the within-group differences that make each student unique, while celebrating the between-group variations that make our country a tapestry.

Becoming culturally competent as an educator is of utmost importance. According to a report by Schott Foundation for Public Education, students of color are not performing at the level of their white peers (2009). The foundation goes on to claim that the achievement gap between minority and majority students is a direct result of the lack of

culturally competent teachers and responsive instruction (2009). Rychly and Graves (2012) echo this claim, and stress that teachers be caring, reflective, and knowledgeable regarding their own culture and others (45-6).

In my practice, cultural competency is a prioritized value. During my student teaching, I was placed in a fourth grade classroom at Helen B. Stafford Elementary. The school is known for its diversity—in my class of 23 students, 8 were Asian, 7 were black, 4 were Latino, 2 were white, 1 was Native American, and 1 was Pacific Islander. Out of those students, 8 spoke languages other than English in the home. Furthermore, students came from all areas of the city, bringing students of all socioeconomic statuses. Working with students from a wide variety of backgrounds enriched my teaching experience. I found a large part of creating a cooperative and productive classroom community involved getting to know my students, which meant, getting to know their culture. Moreover, I discovered I was passionate about truly knowing my students on a personal level, and caring for them as whole people.

Culture, as defined by Georgetown University’s Center for Child and Human Development, “implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group” (2015). Thus, every aspect of a student’s life, and my life, is related to, influenced by, and shaped by culture. At Stafford, I felt incredibly comfortable interacting with and discussing culture—my own and those of my students’. Especially comfortable to me was discussing race. In fact, I chose to complete my education Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) surrounding issues of race by doing a novel study of Jerry Spinelli’s *Maniac Magee*. Working at Stafford and with my set of students, I

considered myself to be culturally competent—interacting with my own and my students’ backgrounds to the benefit of my students’ learning.

Next year, I will be teaching third grade at Chief Leschi Schools, a Tribal School on the Puyallup Reservation. Rather than the wide range of diversity I experienced in my student teaching, all of my students will be Native American.¹ In order to be culturally responsive to my students, per Rychly and Graves, I must interact with the cultures present in my classroom. At Stafford, this interaction felt natural and unforced. At Chief Leschi, I fear this interaction will feel unnatural and forced. My discomfort, and perceived lack of cultural competency at Chief Leschi could potentially be explained in my lack of exposure to native cultures. My dilemma centers around my own identity as a white educator, and the identity of my class, as Native American students. The diversity of Stafford created a community of multiculturalism—the homogeneity of Chief Leschi creates a community of one culture. The culture of Chief Leschi, it is important to note, is not the culture of power. Rather, students in Native communities have been historically underserved and underperforming (Glenn 2011). If anyone could benefit from culturally competent teachers, it is the students in my classroom next year. How can I interact with, respond to, and incorporate native cultures in my classroom and instruction when I am, largely, unknowledgeable of said native cultures? Especially pertinent to my dilemma, is that Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for third grade social studies are centered on past and present native cultures. So, being culturally competent in my first year of teaching will not just be an interaction with and response to my students’ culture—I will be teaching them their culture. Being white, I am afraid I will be accused of appropriating

¹ This paper will use the term “Native American” to describe any group or individual having indigenous origin in The United States. The use of “American Indian,” or “Indian,” may be used in selected quotations and can be considered, for the purpose of this paper, as interchangeable with “Native American.”

native cultures—or worse, actually be appropriating native cultures. How can I, a white educator, teach Native American students their own culture?

THE ORIGIN OF A DILEMMA

The origin of my comfort in discussing race and diversity during my student teaching is striking in comparison to my discomfort looking forward to next year and discussing the same topics within a different cultural context. Part of my comfort at Stafford in discussing racial issues originated in the diversity of my classroom—we all belonged to our own groups, and we all belonged together as a class. It was easy to be one part of a multiethnic group. At Chief Leschi, there will be two groups: my native students, and white me. Throughout my own education, and simply growing up in America, the discussion on race I often heard was black and white. In elementary, middle, and high school, the focus on race in America was on the history of slavery, segregation, and civil rights. The voices I have heard, and still hear in the media today come from black activists, and discuss issues of race in that context. I feel comfortable using the language of race relations—cultural appropriation, white privilege, color-blindness, etc. I know what these terms mean, and I know how to use them. Furthermore, in my undergraduate college education, I took sociology classes on race that heavily focused on discussing diversity in America, especially Black, Latino, and Asian American issues. Furthermore, my non-white friends are mostly from these three races. I've had practice talking about race, both in an academic and casual context, and have found these conversations to be rewarding and stimulating. While I have, in my course of

learning and talking about race and diversity, felt uncomfortable or feared I would say something wrong, the more I became educated on the subject and its relevant issues, and the more I accepted my own participation as a member of the white majority, the more comfortable I became in discussing them. Perhaps the origin of my discomfort in discussing race and culture in the tribal school setting is a lack of exposure and education regarding the subject as it is pertinent and relevant to native people—especially my students. A hugely important facet of my dilemma is not simply discussing race and culture in a tribal school, but my own identity as a white teacher—and my right to have a voice in the discussion at all.

My own education and familiarity with native cultures is limited. By and large, the instruction I received in elementary school and beyond regarding Native Americans was focused on native cultures during colonization and western expansion. My teachers and textbooks often approached Native American history in two ways—firstly, to lament the treatment of natives by white colonists, settlers, and the American government in general. The second was to highly esteem native cultures as peaceful, artistic, and simplistic. I remember my fifth grade teacher telling a story, that I am not sure is founded in fact or not, of a woman travelling with Lewis and Clark. According to my teacher, she left to give birth, by herself, and caught up with the rest of the travelers a few hours later as if nothing had happened. My teacher was amazed at the strength of this woman—representative for him of the strength of all native peoples. This romanticized view of past native cultures persisted in movies like *Dances with Wolves* and Disney's *Pocahontas*, representing tribal cultures and their environments as utopias, mainly characterized by their connection to nature and harmonious communal living. Native

people were presented to me, both in an academic and entertainment setting, as noble savages—people who, living a simple, peaceful way of life, were connected to their inherently good nature. The view of noble savages as beautifully uncorrupted by modern society’s ills was a way to critique life as I knew it—filled with consumerism and harmful environmental practices.²

As a child, I admit I was drawn to the romantic image of past native cultures. The way tribal life was represented to me felt like a fantasy novel—I couldn’t help but get caught up in an idealized image of a simple, peaceful way of life. Then, I began to read Sherman Alexie, a Spokane Native whose writing explores current tribal issues, including growing up on a reservation. In his book *An Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie tells a fictionalized version of his own childhood, mainly focused on his decision to leave tribal school for a public school off the reservation. Throughout the novel, Alexie addresses white reactions to his race and culture. Especially striking to me, is a scene in which a white man, an art collector, shows up at a native funeral. He has come into the possession of a powwow dance outfit and, realizing it must have been stolen, decides to return it. Unfortunately, he misidentifies the tribe the regalia belongs to, and mistakenly thinks it was originally the woman’s whose funeral everyone is attending. Embarrassed, he leaves quickly, outfit in hand. “Billionaire Ted” (Alexie, 2007, 162), as the book refers to him, tries his best to honor and respect native culture and the people at the funeral. He mentions, at length, how much he loves Native Americans. To Junior, the protagonist of the novel, Ted’s confession of admiration for native culture is boring at best, and offensive at worst. Alexie writes:

² For more on the “noble savage,” see Ter Ellingson’s *The Myth of the Noble Savage*.

He was yet another white guy who showed up on the rez because he loved Indian people SOOOOOOOO much. Do you know how many white strangers show up on Indian reservations every year and start telling Indians how much they love them? Thousands. It's sickening. And boring. . . Oh, God, he was a collector. Those guys made Indians feel like insects pinned to a display board (2007, 162-3).

Ted's intentions were, one could argue, good. Or, at least, not malicious. However, he made a fundamental mistake in his admiration for native culture—a mistake I'm not sure I fully understand. I see both sides: an outsider to a culture trying to show respect and admiration for another's traditions, and the people of that culture reacting to this admiration negatively because it is based on stereotypes and misunderstandings about said culture.

To have a true dialogue of respect, I cannot rely, as Billionaire Ted does, on a romanticized view of past or present native culture. In my role as a teacher at a tribal school, this will be incredibly important—and merits a look into the actual history of native cultures, especially how they have been viewed and treated by educational institutions in the United States.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TRIBAL EDUCATION

In what is now The United States, the education of native peoples by white people began, primarily, in the form of missions and religious work. Politically, Native Americans were seen by early settlers as either a potential source of cheap labor, or a

hindrance in establishing future settlements (Reyhner, 2000). Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, conversely, aimed to “Christianize, civilize, and assimilate Indians into European culture” (Reyhner, 2000, 15). While some of these missions initially began with some form of acceptance (Glenn, 2011), many missionaries attempted to educate native children without first studying or making attempts to understand native cultures (Reyhner, 2000). Furthermore, colonists, and later western settlers, often failed to consider tribal affiliations in terms of culture—seeing native people as one group rather than culturally unique among many tribes. Many colonists also assumed native peoples would eagerly adapt to using modern technologies developed by Europeans, and accept Christianity. However, the majority of Native Americans were not often quick to abandon their ways of life or their traditions (Glenn, 2011). Thus, missionaries began to focus on the education of children—with a priority on conversion. Missionaries hoped to spread their religion, which they viewed as civilized in comparison to the native belief systems they encountered. However, missionaries’ teachings had little to no effect on the native way of life—for most students, “parental influence far outweighed the influence of missionaries” (Reyhner, 2000, 16). Their lack of influence over native ways of life led missionaries to open boarding schools that would separate children from their usual routines, and their parents. The small percentage of adults who did convert to Christianity were often trained to become missionaries and preachers themselves to further influence tribal culture with western ideals (Reyhner, 2000, 31).

From first settlers in the 1600s into the early 1800s, churches led the attempt to educate Native Americans. The American government took note of education’s potential influences over native life and began opening federally funded schools. However, the

solution of schooling was not sufficient for the government's aims—and in the late 1830s hundreds of native peoples, from various tribes, were removed to west of the Mississippi River and given land in the form of reservations (Reyhner, 2000). The establishment of reservations greatly diminished the size of traditional native land, and for most tribes, displacement meant that reservations were formed in environments with which tribes were unfamiliar (Reyhner, 2000). The change in land size and its foreign-ness rendered natives “unable to hunt to supply their communities not only with food, but also with the materials needed for clothing, housing, and other tools and implements . . . societies of the women disappeared, because clothing made of hides was replaced by government-distributed trade cloth.” (Almeida, 1997, 762). The creation of reservations greatly affected native cultures and ways of life, and created dependence on the government. However, several white government leaders and activists noted that the isolation of reservations did not support full assimilation into American life. To change reservation culture, to more closely match white lifestyles, they concluded they must remove native children from their homes to be educated, and later influence tribal cultures with American values upon their return (Almeida, 1997).

The Indian Reform Movement of the late 1800s brought government boarding schools front and center in the mission to assimilate, or “Americanize” (Almeida, 1997, 763) Native Americans. While some schools continued to be operated privately by missionaries, most were federally mandated and controlled. The purpose of off-reservation boarding schools, to “replace heritage languages with English; replace ‘paganism’ with Christianity; replace economic, political, social, legal, and aesthetic institutions” (Lomawaima, 2006, 4), was an attempt to “best serve Native Americans”

(Almeida, 1997, 763). It was believed that by stripping natives of their traditional ways, they would better integrate into “modern” society and ways of life—ultimately improving Native Americans’ lives. Native life was considered inferior to superior European American culture. The result—taking children away from their families and culture, and depriving them of familiar clothing, food, and routine was incredibly painful for boarding school students. Furthermore, a popular view at the time suggested that native peoples were “assumed to lack the verbal, cognitive, even motor skills necessary to succeed in school” (Lomawaima, 2006, 16). Thus, schools operated on a double standard—aiming to educate the so-called savage, and also believing native children would never be as academically successful or capable as white children (Lomawaima, 2006). As a result, the education of native men in boarding schools focused on technical work skills, while native women were taught sewing, cooking, and other domestic skills. Upon completion of their education, graduated students were limited in their qualifications—men often finding physical work under white employers, and women serving as maids in white households (Almeida, 1997, 764-5).

The lack of opportunity native young adults encountered upon returning to their reservations greatly impacted an individual’s role in the community, and reservation culture as a whole. Students often left the reservation for school at age six or seven, not to return until the completion of their education, ten or more years later. Upon their return, young people’s experience varied. Many returned to traditional ways of life, eschewing their western education. Others returned “brainwashed” (Almeida, 1997, 765) into believing what they learned at boarding schools were superior to their traditional cultures. Students who attempted to introduce the use of their new Americanized values on the

reservation were often met with resistance, as were those who attempted to reintegrate themselves into native life. The separation from and re-immersion into native culture has had far reaching consequences for native life. Deirdre A. Almeida writes:

This formal education system contributed enormously to the breakdown of Native families, including women’s traditional roles, and led to the development of many of the social ills that still affect Native nations today, such as dysfunctional families and substance abuse (1997, 762).

While the intention of boarding schools was to assimilate Native Americans—and did so forcibly, many students who returned from school became passionate about preserving native traditions and resisting assimilation (Almeida, 1997, 766).

A huge shift in the government’s approach to tribal education was instigated by the Meriam Report, released in 1928. The report included information on deplorable conditions in boarding schools, citing a lack of “nutrition and health care standards” (Almeida, 1997, 766) and the negative effects of removing children from their families. It suggested that schools be opened on reservations so that students could maintain their familial structures. It was further believed that schools on reservations could more immediately interact with native culture, affecting greater change (Dejong, 1993, 134). The Meriam Report eventually inspired the Indian New Deal in 1934 which resulted in increased numbers of Native Americans attending public schools, and the opening of schools on reservations. The Kennedy Report, released in 1969, harshly criticized the historical treatment of Native Americans, focusing specifically on education and the failure of public and federal schools. The document, titled *Indian Education: A National Tragedy—A National Challenge*, claimed the education of Native Americans in public

and on-reservation schools perpetuated native stereotypes, resulting in “feelings of inferiority among Indian students” (Committee, 1969). The report called for “more Indian involvement in the current system” (Dejong, 1993, 196) and resulted in more funding for native education, and the inception of the National Indian Advisory Board (Dejong, 1993, 196). It wasn’t until the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, however, that gave tribes rights to have control, albeit in conjunction with the Bureau of Indian Education, in running tribal schools (Lomawaima, 2006, 117). Furthermore, boarding schools remained, though on a much smaller scale, until 1980. Shifting to public and on-reservation schools and slowly allowing Native Americans a say in their own education has resulted in a shift regarding attitudes toward assimilation. Native students, over many years, have been slowly taught value in their traditions, and encouraged to preserve their culture (Lomawaima, 2006, 82).

Current issues surrounding tribal education are complicated and pressing. As of 2013, ninety-two percent of Native American students attend public school (Executive Office of the President [EOP], 2014). Historically, Native Americans have been educated in a segregated setting. The use of boarding schools and on-reservation day schools kept Native American students isolated from public school cultures. Their entry into the public school system brings cultural misunderstandings from both peers and teachers, and a lack of culturally relevant instruction (Glenn, 2011, 196-7), much of which was criticized in The Kennedy Report (Committee, 1969). Today, while Native Americans in public schools represent less than one percent of the total student population, they account for two percent of suspensions, and three percent of expulsions. Reacting to negative aspects of public schooling by suggesting that Native Americans

only be educated in tribal schools, however, problematically removes a family's choice in the education of their children. Furthermore, regardless of potential pitfalls of the public school system, tribal schools run by the Bureau of Indian Education in partnership with tribal governments are significantly underperforming. While the high school graduation rate of Native Americans in public schools is sixty-seven percent, the lowest of any other racial or ethnic group, graduation rates from tribal schools are even lower, at fifty-three percent (EOP, 2014). In standardized tests, Native American students in both elementary and secondary perform lower than any other group of students, with students in tribal schools scoring significantly lower than Native students in public schools (EOP, 2014).³ Native American youth are also at risk for suicide, which is the second leading cause of death among teens and young adults (EOP, 2014). A potential explanation for low performance, and an issue in itself, is high rates of absenteeism—greater than any other racial or ethnic group, with “two out of three report[ing] that they had one or more unexcused absences in the preceding month” (Glenn, 2011, 8). Teachers in both public and tribal schools claim, perhaps stereotypically, that their Native students do not value education, and put little effort into their work (Glenn, 2011, 8). This perception of native students as “deficit” (Foley, 2008, 222) creates a bias against native students and perpetuates low performance.

My future workplace, Chief Leschi, is a beautiful school—every aspect of the architecture was done purposefully to represent and celebrate Puyallup culture. From the locally sourced stone creating the flooring, to the stair railing designed to look like canoe paddles and basket weaving, to the ceiling rafters modeled after longhouse interiors, the school's visual appearance embraces its tribal affiliation. While the current state of tribal

³ See Appendix A

education is not without its persisting problems, the mere setting of the school and its intentional design shows a huge shift in the nation's history of educating Native peoples. Enduring missions, relocations, boarding schools, and forced assimilation into white mainstream culture was, and still is, a reality for many Native Americans. Native American cultures today have been greatly changed by the European American way of life. The past goal of assimilation into American society was partially accomplished—Native Americans do not live as they did before contact with white settlers. How then, per Washington State Common Core Standards, can I, as a white teacher, validate and teach past native cultures, while simultaneously validating and teaching current native cultures, which, by and large, are the result of white people's racism, oppression, mistreatment, unacceptance, and misunderstanding of native people?

IMPLICATIONS FOR MY PRACTICE

My study of the history of tribal education in The United States raises many questions concerning my future position. Problems of such scope that have persisted for so many years do not have simple solutions. In fact, attempting to wrap up hundreds of years of oppression and its consequences in a pretty box with a neat bow on top is disingenuous and, frankly, impossible. My focus, rather, is to explore my questions and possible frameworks through which I can gain a deeper understanding of myself, my students, and how to teach and care for them effectively.

As a white educator working in a tribal school, I question my own participation in the attempt to assimilate Native Americans into dominate white culture. The

acknowledgment of educational institutions, and the government itself, of its failure in fairly treating and caring for Native Americans motivates me to reconsider assimilation and what it means for Native people today. Assimilation is, with reason, viewed negatively. Moreover, the notion of assimilation, especially as it pertains to the past treatment of Native people, as a potentially positive concept is problematic at best and horribly offensive at worst. Assimilation is not regarded in this way in all contexts—in fact, if I chose to move to France and refused to adopt any French cultural norms or language, I would be considered inflexible and ignorant. A level of assimilation would be beneficial, perhaps even critical, to my success in finding work and building relationships in a culture foreign to me. Politically incorrect as it may be, one could argue that further assimilation into dominant society would help Native communities overcome current problems. The glaringly obvious difference between my own hypothetical assimilation into French culture and Native American assimilation into white culture is the element of choice. In the words of the Kennedy Report:

The dominant policy of the Federal government toward the American Indian has been one of forced assimilation which has vacillated between the two extremes of coercion and persuasion (Committee, 1969).

Native Americans have been forced to modify their ways of life—as previously noted, Native American life has changed significantly as a result of contact with white settlers. Rather than promote further adoption of the dominant culture’s values and routines, native cultures deserve to have choice in governing their own tribes, and running their own lives. So, given the current state of tribal education, how do we move forward? Is

requiring, or even valuing, success in school further forcing Native Americans to assimilate to the dominant white culture?

Questions regarding my role as teacher—and my own complicity in forcing dominant white culture upon my students leads me back to Rychly and Graves (2012) and cultural responsiveness. In *Widening the Circle*, Beverly J. Klug and Patricia T. Whitfield (2003) apply principles of culturally responsive pedagogy to working with Native American students. Cultural responsiveness with this population, they claim, is:

Teaching in a way that ‘makes sense’ to students who are not assimilated into the dominant culture. . . We want to adjust our teaching of American Indian students to make education as meaningful to them as possible (151).

It is safe to say, hopefully, that all teachers want their students to find meaning and value in their education. As an institution, given the overwhelming underperformance of native students, schools have not made education matter to Native Americans. I grapple with the concept of assimilation and wondering if asking Native students to care about school is asking them to comply to white cultural standards. On the other hand, it is clear, regardless of general Native American attitudes toward school, that education is key to success in America. My own values regarding education and my belief in its importance are not unbiased, and are evident in my decision to become a teacher. Klug and Whitfield (2003) frame teaching Native students “as providing a gateway for students to be able to succeed in the dominant culture” (153). Rather than view my role as a white teacher in a tribal school as oppressive, I can choose to respond to my students and deliver instruction in ways that are relevant to them, giving them a chance to embrace and know their native culture, as well as how to operate in dominant society.

My desire to encourage native students to celebrate and participate in their own culture, and the expectation that I will actively teach native culture, makes me want to learn as much as I can about said native culture. Katherine Au (2006), in her work with Native Hawaiian students, explores this concept of culture. She claims that culture has two aspects: “vertical” (8) and “horizontal” (9). A vertical dimension of culture, she explains, are “long-lasting values, beliefs, and practices that are passed down from generation to generation” (8). A horizontal dimension of culture is the adjustment of these vertical values “involving dynamic processes of change” (9). A good example of fixed and fluid values is the institution of marriage. Marriage is a stable cultural norm in American society—and the world at large. However, over thousands of years, reasons for marriage, its definition, and its benefits have greatly changed. In terms of Native American culture, and the way life has shifted over time for Native people, it would be valuable to recognize what is “vertical” (Au, 2006, 8) in native culture, and what is “horizontal” (Au, 2006, 9). In this goal, I encounter further dilemmas and questions. Given the drastic changes of native life since colonization, how do we decide, and who decides, what elements of native culture are “worth” being taught, or upheld? Are the things we teach children about native culture values that truly resonate and remain with Native people and societies, or are they based on stereotypes and assumptions that have been filtered through dominant white value systems? Moreover, if I am expected to instruct and validate native culture, I should be an expert on native traditions, languages, values, etc. However, even though teaching culture is my job, how can I assume to have any credibility with my students given our own cultural differences?

In examining my own perceptions and assumptions, I found I believed I knew some fixed aspects of native culture—a respect for art and care for the environment. While some of these assumptions are a result of my own education, others are influenced by entertainment and news media. Klug and Whitfield (2003) validate the instruction of arts as it pertains to Native culture, claiming it is a way teachers can easily and simply promote respect for Native values (159-60). Conversely, Native American activist Phyllis Young criticized the instruction of art as a way to incorporate native culture into schools. She writes:

Aside from some cosmetic alterations like the inclusion of beadwork, traditional dance, basket weaving and some language classes, the curriculum taught in Indian schools remained exactly the same, reaching the same conclusions, indoctrinating children with the same values (Noriega, 1992, 387).

While art may be an integral aspect of native life, simplifying lessons on native culture into arts and crafts projects is insufficient. Also problematic is the assumption that all Native Americans care about the environment. While art and care for the environment could potentially engage any child, Doug Foley (2008) warns teachers of oversimplifying deeply held values, and overemphasizing fluid aspects of Native culture. He writes, “When whites think their superior culture has destroyed a more backward culture, they nostalgically seek to preserve what is left of their notion of the cultural tradition” (223). Responding to Native students based on cultural assumptions or perceived trends is not true cultural responsiveness. Examining my own culture, and part to play in educating Native Americans, is vital to the task at hand. An awareness of myself, per Rychly and Graves (2012), can lead to an awareness of others (46). However, true culturally

responsive teaching moves beyond inner reflection and focuses on students in non-generalized ways. Foley (2008) writes:

Sweeping cultural theories are not good prescriptions for how to behave with individual students. In relying upon cultural explanations, well-intentioned teachers saw less need to get to know how each student was responding to their classroom and the school (224).

So, a new dilemma emerges: I am warned not to make generalizations about my students based on their culture. And yet, I am told that white educators working with non-dominant groups of students must consider cultural differences between themselves and their students, and adjust their instruction and treatment of students based on this knowledge. Au (2006) addresses this dilemma, noting a difference between generalizations and stereotyping. She writes, “Social scientists make generalizations based on the results of research . . . stereotyping differs from generalizing by putting forth blanket or all-encompassing statements” (5). For example, a generalization of Native American culture is its collectivist aspect. John D’Amato (1993) describes this as “rivalrous” (199) as opposed to dominant culture’s individualism and competitiveness. According to D’Amato (1993), Native American students are concerned with being a part of the classroom community—they do not want to stand out or receive public praise for their work (199). When teachers do single out a student, the rest of the class will do their best to get them back down on everyone else’s level (Klug, 2003, 162). Recognizing this generalization can be incredibly helpful for teachers of native students and can guide their instructional methods. However, expecting each and every student to participate in this cultural norm would be stereotyping. Furthermore, “students sometimes respond to

school and classroom environments as members of groups; at other times they respond as individuals” (Foley, 2008, 225).

My initial reaction to discovering that third grade social studies standards in Washington center on past and present native cultures was to feel pressured to become an expert capable of teaching the subject. By studying and preparing, I would hopefully be able to prove, perhaps over time, that I had some credibility on the subject. However, my study and preparation has led me more to accept that I am not an expert—nor do I need to be. I do not want to assume I know my students and where they come from before I have even met them.

I chose to discuss these feelings with Terence Beck of the Education Department at The University of Puget Sound. Beck’s own experience teaching in self-contained 7th and 8th grade classrooms on the Hopi Reservation brought light to my own dilemma. Tasked with teaching Hopi government structures, Beck set out to become as knowledgeable as possible on the subject. After significant research, including meetings with tribal council members, he began to teach his carefully planned unit. Regardless of his preparation, his students immediately discredited his knowledge—how would he, as a white outsider, know anything about Hopi government? Beck expressed his wish that he had let his students do the research themselves. Rather than meet himself with tribal council members, he could have invited them into his classroom to speak directly to the students. Beck reflected, “I had no reason to be the expert. I had to be the facilitator.”

Letting go of the pressure to be an expert in Native cultures frees me to truly know my students both as a group and as individuals. Forcing myself to have an understanding of native culture is an overwhelming task, and believing that I could, is a

dangerous assumption. This is further complicated by the problematic ways Native Americans have been grouped historically—that is, as “Native Americans.” While all of my students will fit into this description, and most will be Puyallup, Chief Leschi has students from ninety-two tribes, resulting in diverse traditions, values, and languages. Furthermore, the Puyallup Reservation is one of the most urban reservations in The United States (Wright, 2015). According to Klug and Whitfield (2003), Native Americans living in urban populations are generally less knowledgeable about their heritage than those in rural areas (204). The diversity within Chief Leschi and its urban environment make me reconsider my previous claim that my class next year will be a homogenous group with common cultural norms and values. Ultimately, it was white people who chose to group tribes together under one identity (Glenn 195). Charles L. Glenn (2011) writes, “Education policy-makers should abandon, once and for all, the harmful illusion that the diversity to which schooling should respond is a diversity defined by *race*” (195). We must change the way we view and understand diversity, allowing for differences and variations within our current groupings.

LOOKING FORWARD

Exploring my dilemma as a white teacher in a tribal school, its origins, and research and history relevant to my questions has inspired me for my work in the coming year. My dilemma still stands: I am a white teacher, a member of dominant culture, assuming a position of authority over Native American students, who have been historically oppressed by educational systems. I am tasked with teaching them their own

culture. I will undoubtedly continue to grapple with my questions and grow in my understanding of native cultures in the coming year. Thus far, reflection on my own culture, my exposure to native cultures, and in consideration of history and research, I have made some commitments for my first year of teaching.

Klug and Whitfield (2003) claim the first and most pressing thing native students need is “self-respect” (154). They write, “Our sense of self-respect comes from the way we are treated by those around us” (154). Historically invalidated and stripped of self-respect, it is critical that I value and validate my students’ individual experiences and identities, as well as their group associations. Given the marginalized status of Native American students today, it is crucial that native students are treated warmly by their teachers and feel like they belong in school. A concrete way I can do this in my practice is to use a wide variety of participation structures, allowing students to work and learn in styles that matter and make sense to them. I will be culturally responsive, per Au (2006), by taking generalizations about native students into consideration, rejecting stereotypes, and accepting every child as an individual. In addition, I cannot rely on my own assumptions—I must continually examine my perspective, where it comes from, and look to concrete research to inform my view of native cultures.

My acceptance that I will continue to learn and grow in my understanding of native cultures frees me from the pressure of being an expert. Rather, I will focus on being a facilitator—welcoming guest speakers into my classroom, and inviting student participation in sharing their own values and experiences. Klug and Whitfield (2003) encourage educators of all student populations to become critics of classroom materials, examining them and addressing stereotypes when they are found (155). I hope to extend

this concept and enable my students to be critics of classroom materials in productive ways.

My own personal pedagogy is built upon my belief that teachers and administrations should care for students as whole people. In Native American cultures, teachers are seen as “healers” (Klug, 2003, 205), commissioned to care for every aspect of a child’s being. In *Evoking the Spirit in Public Education*, Parker Palmer (1999) writes:

Teaching and learning, done well, are done not by disembodied intellects but by whole persons whose minds cannot be disconnected from feeling and spirit, from heart and soul. To teach as a whole person to the whole person is not to lose one's professionalism as a teacher but to take it to a deeper level.

Caring for students in this way can be incredibly positive for student achievement and happiness, and overwhelmingly discouraging and painful in our own limitations and ability to do enough. By aspiring to be culturally competent with my Native American students, I do not expect to fix the complicated issues surrounding tribal education today. But, by caring for my students as whole people, and committing myself to culturally responsive practices, I may begin to bridge the gap.

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APPENDIX A

